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THE COTTAGE WAS IN FLAMES. *Frontispiece.*

W. PUENTE

BOUND TO RISE

OR

The Young Florists of Spring Hill

AND

WALTER LORING'S CAREER

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN



NEW YORK
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BOUND TO RISE.

CHAPTER I.

A DARK OUTLOOK.

“WELL, Frank, what luck?”

“None at all, Archie. It’s the same old story everywhere; no place open. It does beat the nation, doesn’t it?” And with a long-drawn sigh Frank Atherton flung his hat on the table and dropped on one of the kitchen chairs.

Archie, who had been peeling potatoes for dinner and was now in the act of dropping them into the pot on the stove, paused long enough in his operations to inquire: “Did you try Fetwood & Lansing, and Hochman, Fiedler & Co.?”

“I tried every one of the firms, and a lot of strangers besides. I walked from here clear down to the Battery and back. But it was no

use, and I might have saved my shoe leather." And Frank gazed rather ruefully at his shoes, both of which were sadly in need of repair. Archie put the potatoes in the pot, dropped the lid in place, and then began to tidy up the sink.

"I am sure I don't know what we are going to do," he remarked slowly. "Dan can't support the three of us. His seven dollars a week simply won't do it, no matter how hard we economize. Of course, we might move into one room in a tenement——"

"No, I'd die living like that!" burst out Frank. "I hate even a small flat like this—all cooped up like turkeys being fattened for market!"

"Only we're not getting fat!" laughed Archie. "If this state of affairs keeps up much longer we'll either have to cut down our store bills or else go in rags. This is the only suit I've got outside of my Sunday best, and look at it—worn so thin you could almost use it for mosquito netting!"

Frank rammed his fists into his pockets and sprang to his feet. "Something has got to be done, and that's all there is to it. I'm not going

to stand idly by and see Dan supporting all of us. It isn't fair."

"I wish I was strong enough to work out," said Archie, his otherwise bright face clouding over for the instant. "But ever since that heavy Broadway truck ran over my left leg I don't seem to be able to pull myself together."

"Don't you worry, Archie, your leg will be all right some day; the hospital doctor said so. And you are doing your full share in keeping house for Dan and me," went on Frank, by way of comforting his younger brother. "But I am strong and healthy, more so even than Dan, and it isn't right that I should be idle."

"It's not your fault that Mr. Gibson failed and left you without a job."

"No, but sometimes I think that I am too particular about what I want to do. I might get work in some factory, or I might become a street peddler——"

"Which Dan never would agree to," broke in Archie. "Besides, I imagine the factories are all full, and as a street peddler it isn't likely that you would make your salt."

"Perhaps I might, selling shoe laces, 'dree pairs for fife cent'!" and Frank cried out the last words in exact imitation of the numerous street-curb venders he had heard.

"Imagine you standing on a corner with a big tray strapped around your neck!" laughed Archie. "'This way, gents, for your gold-plated collar buttons, three for a dime,' or 'Your choice of these elegant silk neckties ten cents, while they last!' It would give me a fit to see you!"

And then both boys laughed at the mental picture which had been drawn.

"I might become an agent of some sort," went on Frank, at length. "I see an awful lot of advertisements in the want columns of the papers for that class of workers."

"Dan says they are mostly humbugs. He was speaking about them only yesterday. A man has either got to have experience or lots of nerve, and you have neither."

"Well, then, there isn't anything for me to do but to sit down and wait for a situation to drop into my lap," returned Frank half-irritably.

“Perhaps Dan will have good news for you. He’ll be home to dinner in ten or fifteen minutes,” said Archie, by way of soothing his brother’s disappointment. “If you want to help you can set the table while I fry the steak,” he went on, thinking that a little work just then would keep Frank from brooding over his ill luck.

His brother at once sprang up from the lounge upon which he had thrown himself, and with a jerk removed the red-and-white table cover. Then he spread the white linen, and this was followed by a rattle of dishes in the closet as he brought out plates, saucers, and cups for the mid-day meal.

CHAPTER II.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE ATHERTON BOYS.

THE Atherton brothers were three in number. The oldest was Dan, age eighteen; then came Frank, two years younger, followed by Archibald, two years younger still. They were bright, manly young fellows, although close confinement to a clerk's desk in a dry goods emporium had taken the ruddy color from Dan's cheeks, and Archie was still suffering from a painful accident which had happened eight months before.

The three brothers were orphans. Mr. John Atherton, the father, had died three years before, while Frank and Archie were still attending school. He had been a whole-souled farmer and produce merchant, with a farm out on Long Island and a place of business in a basement on Barclay Street, New York. At his death he had left his wife the sum of two thousand dollars, and with this to her credit in the bank Mrs. Atherton,

who was city born and bred, had come to New York to make her living and give her sons such advantages as the metropolis might afford.

In her younger days Mrs. Atherton had been quite an amateur artist, and she fondly hoped to earn a good living by her brush. But she soon discovered that working for her friends and working for strangers, who were expected to pay, were different things, and, while she got some few orders, they paid poorly, and at the end of the first year in New York she found herself with less than a thousand dollars on hand, three boys still to support, and with no prospects for the future.

It was then that the matter was talked over with Daniel, her oldest son, a quiet, thoughtful youth, who had many of the traits of his father about him. Dan at once avowed his intention of going to work, and he procured a situation for himself in less than a week, and soon after another for his brother Frank.

The fact that the two boys were working and bringing home twelve dollars weekly between them was a great relief to Mrs. Atherton's mind,

but hardly had the cloud which had appeared been dispersed than another, far darker than the first, loomed up.

The loving mother was taken sick with a strange malady, which the doctors agreed she had contracted while sitting over her paints and oils. At first she complained of a pain in the head and was forced to lie down; then the pain went down to her back, and finally it attacked her heart, and one night, exactly six weeks after the first signs of sickness, the boys found themselves motherless and alone in the world.

No pen could describe their grief. For a while it seemed to each one of them as if the end of the world had come. They stood around in a dazed way when kind neighbors came in and arranged for the funeral, and when it was all over and Mrs. Atherton had been placed beside her husband in that little lot in the cemetery out on Long Island they returned to the flat in New York miserable beyond expression and wondering if anyone had ever had such trouble before.

But youth is strong and hopeful, and their grief, though deep and sincere, did not last. The

busy city was about them, they must now depend upon themselves, and the three boys went to work with a will to earn their own living. Dan and Frank remained where they were, and soon after Archie procured a situation in a stationery store to mind a stand and deliver papers and packages.

Matters went along very well in this fashion until the day came when poor Archie was knocked down in Broadway and run over. He was carried to a hospital, and here lay for many weeks, unable to move his lower limbs. When at last he was well enough to be removed in a carriage it was found that he could not stand up on his left leg for any great length of time. The doctors said that all of the cords had been strained as well as bruised, and that it might take months, and even years, before it would be strong enough to be relied upon as before the accident.

Of course Archie could not return to his situation, and so from that time on he remained at home and did the work which heretofore the brothers had divided between them. Luckily, he had often helped his mother, so he now did what was needed as well as the average girl. Some of

the other boys who lived in the house had nicknamed him Polly, because of this, but he did not mind and only laughed at them and told them that he would not be entitled to that name until his curls grew a bit longer.

Mrs. Atherton's sickness and Archie's accident had caused the family savings to dwindle to exactly seven hundred dollars, which amount was now jealously guarded by all three. Frank openly declared he would not touch the money until he was next-door to becoming a tramp, and Dan and Archie silently agreed with him; indeed the latter was often downcast, thinking that his accident had taken nearly a hundred dollars from the former capital.

"That hundred dollars would have bought each of us a brand-new outfit, from shoes to hat," he said to himself. "And now, as it is, Frank's next-door to being barefooted and Dan's's coat is so shiny at the elbows you can see your face in it. I wish I could just make a pot of money, I do, indeed!"

CHAPTER III.

DAN'S SETBACK.

ARCHIE thought about the pot of money as he stood over the little cook stove frying a tiny steak he had purchased at the corner butcher shop. His face was hot and flushed, and every now and then he would take the fore part of his arm to brush back those curls which always would come down into his face.

“Maybe, if I was a girl, I could make some money as a cook,” he said to himself. “But I am not even lucky enough to be born a girl,” he laughed. “Oh, I do hope Dan has good news for Frank!”

The steak was well done—Dan and Frank liked it best that way—and set back on the stove to keep warm, and then Archie poured the water off the potatoes and put them in the oven to steam

dry. There was also some canned corn in a saucepan, and this he stirred up and seasoned to suit.

"The table is set," said Frank, with a final clatter of knives, forks, and spoons. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"You might cut a few slices of bread and get the butter out of the pantry," returned Archie, as he set to work to tidy up a bit and wash his hands and face. "My, but it's warm work over the stove!"

"Spring is coming; that is why you feel so warm, Archie. Supposing I open one of the back windows. The wind comes from the front."

Archie agreed, and Frank threw up the sash to its fullest extent, letting in the fresh February air. Then both sat down to wait for their elder brother.

The old-fashioned clock on the parlor mantel had struck twelve a quarter of an hour before, and now it was time for Dan to make his appearance. Frank, who was hungry because of his long walk, began to nibble at a piece of bread.

Ten minutes passed—a long time it seemed just then—and then Archie arose and limped through the bedrooms into the parlor.

“The steak will be spoiled,” he observed to Frank, who had followed him. “Dan was never so late before—that is, not since the Christmas holidays.”

The two stood in front of the one large parlor window, which commanded a view of the corner opposite, around which their brother must soon make his way. In the street below the people were rushing up and down, while the rattle of wagons and trucks was incessant. They were up two flights, so that the noise was not loud enough to disturb them.

“It’s an awful big and an awful bustling place,” said Frank, as if half speaking to himself. “But I can’t say that I like it much. I would rather be in a smaller place, or even in the country.”

“I don’t care for the city much myself,” returned Archie, even more slowly. “Somehow, you can’t rush outdoors in the sunshine like you can when there are nothing but green fields

around you. The city is so penned in that it fairly contracts your chest to look at it."

"I don't wonder that father didn't care to move here while he was alive. He often said it was good enough to do business in, but that was all."

"Oh, I dare say it's nice enough if you are rich and can live uptown in a fine neighborhood. But it's no place for poor people, although they say there are loads of poor people who would rather die in the city than move away. Oh, Frank, look at the bird on the telegraph wire over there!" went on Archie, with a sudden cry. "Is it possible that it's a robin, so early in the year?"

"It certainly looks like a robin, Archie. Poor thing! How cold it must be! and how out of place it must feel here, with nothing but brick and stone on every hand!"

"Maybe I can coax it to the window sill with some bread crumbs, Frank. Open the window softly."

Frank did as commanded, and Archie hurried off for the bread. But long before he returned

the bird had left its perch and disappeared over the house-tops.

"Gone!" said Frank, as he closed the window. "Gone—to find a home in some meadow or orchard far away, I suppose," he added. "I wish I was a bird; I'd get out of New York too."

"Would you, really, Frank? Well, I don't know but what—oh, here comes Dan at last!"

Both of the brothers pressed their faces against the cold window pane to see Dan leave the pavement opposite and cut diagonally across the street, through the maze of moving vehicles, to the entrance of the flat house. Then they walked back to the kitchen, and Archie hastened to place the dinner on the table.

Usually Dan came up the stairs two steps at a time and burst open the door with a rush, but to-day they heard him ascending the stairs slowly. He hesitated at the door, with his hand on the knob. When at last he did come in they saw by a single glance at his troubled face that something had gone wrong.

"What's the matter?" questioned Frank, in quick alarm, and Archie looked the same question.

Dan took a long breath, and, walking across the kitchen, hung his hat up on the peg in the corner. Then he turned and faced his two brothers, and there was a slight quiver on his lips.

"I've been discharged," he said, and turned away.

"Discharged!" ejaculated Archie and Frank simultaneously. "Surely, you do not mean it, Dan?" went on the latter.

"Yes, I do. This is to be my last week at Bon-tiere & Cragg's. They gave me the notice this morning, so that I might have a chance to look for another place. Trade is so light, they say, that they are going to lay off four of us at once."

Frank and Archie looked at each other in dismay. With Dan out of employment and themselves doing nothing, what would happen next?

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOYS TALK IT OVER.

"It's a shame, that's what it is!" burst out Archie, who was the first to speak. "I thought they said the place would be permanent."

"They said they would try to make it so. But trade has become too bad for them," returned Dan, as he sank down in a chair. "I suppose they are not to blame."

"But—but what are you going to do now?" questioned Frank, with a blank look.

"I don't know, Frank. Did you have any luck this morning?"

"Not the least bit, although I nearly walked my legs off. The dullness isn't confined to Bon-tiere & Cragg's business alone, but it's the same everywhere."

"I know it. I stopped at two places on the way home, looking for another situation, and all to no purpose."

"Well, I don't know." Frank bit his finger nail thoughtfully. "We can't all of us remain idle. Our savings would soon dwindle down to nothing."

"Oh, we mustn't think of touching that for living purposes!" cried Archie. "You want that to go in business with some day, you know."

"We won't touch it until we actually have to," said Dan. "Archie, your dinner looks very nice, but I haven't much heart to eat."

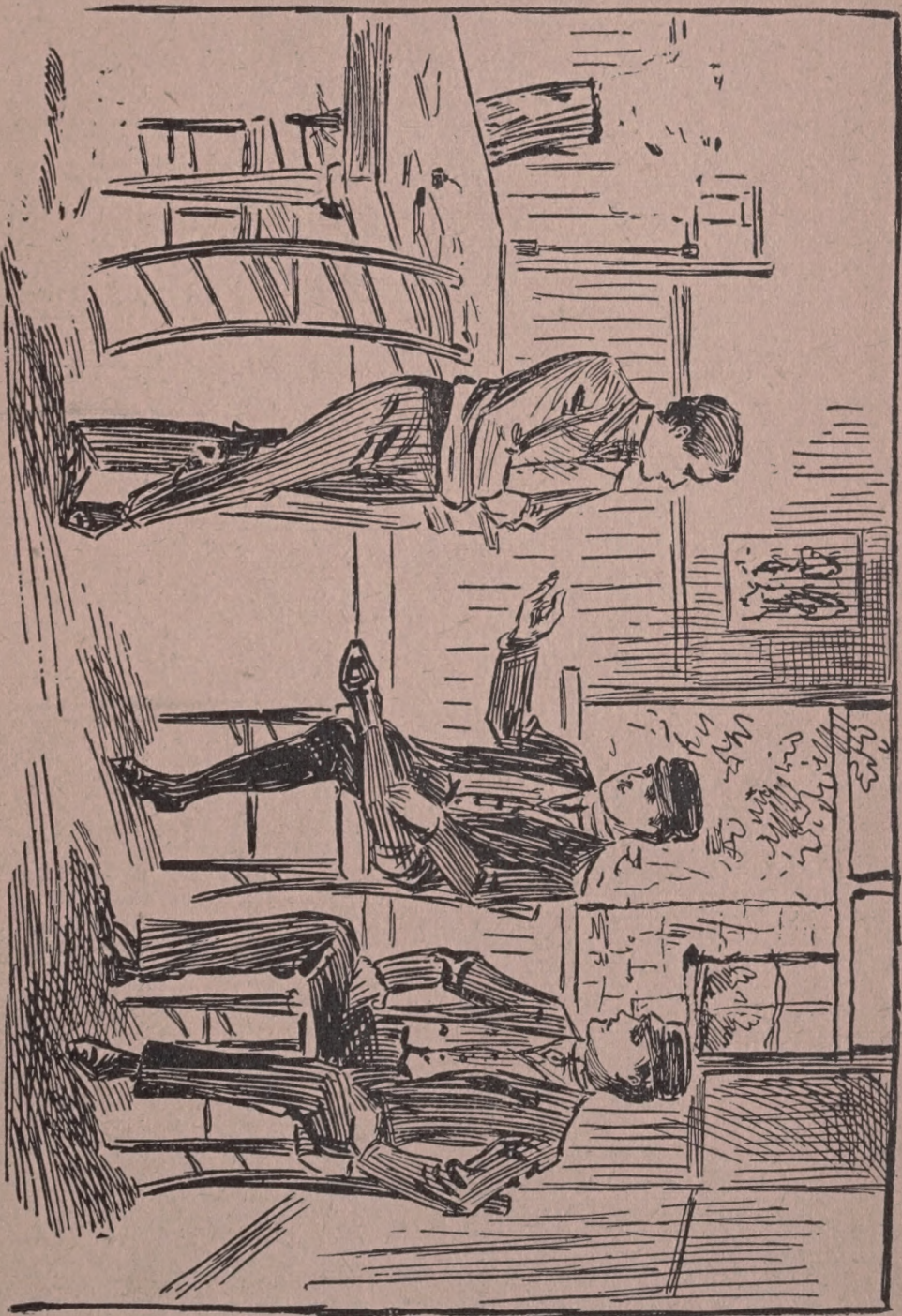
"Nor I," added Frank. "Oh, but I am really sick of trying to get on in New York! Sometimes I wish I had never seen the city!"

"Well, as for that, I am rather sick of New York myself," returned Dan slowly. "I sometimes believe a fellow would stand more show in a smaller place."

"Then supposing we get out?" said Archie, who never wasted time in reaching a conclusion.

"But where shall we go?" asked Frank. "We haven't any prospects anywhere else."

"Then let's go back to the country. We can at least live cheaper there than we can here."



THE THREE TALKED IT OVER. P. 18.

Both Dan and Frank laughed at Archie's last remark, but almost instantly the face of the older brother grew serious.

"We may have to go back to the country, if we can't find anything to do in New York or some other city. We could buy a small farm with our money, and by working it ourselves probably make a living and a little more, too!"

"Hurrah! Dan has solved the problem of how the Atherton brothers are to keep from starving!" cried Archie. "And, that being so, let us all have our dinners."

And without waiting for Dan to carve, he took up the knife and fork and dealt out portions of the steak, and also dished out the potatoes and corn.

The brothers were soon eating, and while doing so they discussed the situation from every possible point of view. Frank related his morning's experience in detail, to which the others listened with deep interest.

"But I won't give up," he said. "I'm going out again when you go to work, Dan."

And out he did go, and did not return until

after the electric lights in the streets were turned on and Dan had been in for half an hour.

It was the same old story; not a single situation of any kind to be had.

The remainder of the week slipped by rapidly, and on Saturday night Dan came home with his last pay in his vest pocket.

"Here you are, Archie," he said, as he handed all but a dollar over to his younger brother. "Make it last just as long as you can, even if you give us soup every day."

"And no pie," put in Frank, with a sorry little laugh. Frank had a great fondness for pie.

"Now, if we were in the country, I could bring out a pumpkin or some apples and make pie just the same," said Archie.

"Goodness gracious! then let us go back to the country by all means!" burst out Frank, smacking his lips loudly.

Dan, who had flung himself down on the couch, sprang up of a sudden and faced his brothers.

"Look here. You two speak so much of the country, supposing we do go back? There is nothing here in New York for us."

"I'm willing," said Frank. "I can't stand doing nothing much longer."

"But where would you go—back to Long Island?" queried Archie.

"We can settle that later, Archie. The main thing is, do we want to go back—and become farmers?"

"I don't care so very much for farming," put in Frank. "But there is one thing I do like, and I've been thinking of it ever since I visited that big flower store on Sixth Avenue the other day in search of a job. That is to become a florist and raise flowers for the city stores to sell."

"Would that pay?" asked Archie, with interest. "Because, if it would, I wouldn't like anything better. I have always loved flowers."

"Sometimes it pays very well to raise potted plants and cut flowers for the city trade," said Dan. "There was Mr. Gilson did very well at it, and so did Sam Lauter. Of course, the main thing, after raising your flowers, is to make a deal with one or more stores to sell your stuff for you on commission, or buy it outright."

"And would you like that occupation, Dan?" asked Archie.

"I believe I would. I, too, always loved flowers, and I would like most anything that was honorable and would bring us in the dollars. But you must remember it is hard work, and often flowers do not turn out as well as you hoped they would, and then the market gets overstocked and the prices go down."

"I wouldn't mind the hard work," said Frank. "And I have an idea, Dan. It would be better for you than to be cramped up behind a desk all day."

"Maybe it would, Frank. I must say I enjoyed outdoor work around the old home."

"So did I!" cried Archie. "Don't you remember how we used to feed the chickens and drive old Dolly from pasture? And what fun it was helping father and the hired men store the crops away and barrel the apples for shipment!"

"And don't you remember the flower beds?" added Frank. "Those big roses of all kinds, and the geraniums, and the asters and zinnias,

and all the rest? My! I can smell the mignonette and heliotrope yet!"

"And the honeysuckle over the porch and that monstrous bed of petunias down by the meadow lot," put in Dan, growing enthusiastic with the rest. "It did make a lovely home, didn't it, boys?"

"It was the best home a fellow could have," said Frank. "Beat brick and stone walls all hollow! Let us become florists and farmers, and leave the city to take care of itself."

CHAPTER V.

REACHING A CONCLUSION.

THEY talked the matter over until nearly eleven o'clock, and when they retired they had about half made up their mind to undertake what Frank suggested. But there were many difficulties in the way, and Dan advised that they think the matter over for at least a week longer, and in the meantime continue their search for employment in the city.

"If you are under salary you run no risk and know just what you can expect," he said.

All day long on Monday and Tuesday Dan went on a hunt for a situation, and so did Frank. In the meantime Archie kept house just as economically as possible and spent his spare time in poring over a book he possessed on floriculture and over several seed catalogues he obtained from various sources.

On Wednesday morning, still without employment, Frank and Dan sat looking over the parts of a morning paper. They had hunted the want columns through in vain for something which might be worth looking up. Suddenly Frank gave a little cry.

"Listen to this," he said. "It's among the real-estate advertisements: 'For sale in New Jersey, twenty miles from New York, a well-kept farm of seven acres, house of five rooms, barn, good greenhouse and frames, and cowshed. Well and brook on place, mile and half from station. Must be sold at once, as owner wishes to go to Europe. Address Mrs. Emil Burger, Spring Hill, N. J.' What do you think of that?"

"Read it again," said Archie, and Frank did so, while both of his brothers listened to every word.

"Greenhouse and frames strike us just right," said Archie. "But maybe the owner will want a good deal more for it than we care to pay."

"I have a good mind to write and find out how much she asks, anyway. If she wants to go to Europe, perhaps she'll sell cheap."

"It will do no harm to write," said Dan. "If I am not mistaken, Spring Hill is a very pretty town back of the Orange Mountains. Father used to get his best strawberries from there."

"Oh, yes, I remember it now," said Frank. "Father went up there once to see about berries. Supposing I write at once? Then if nothing turns up here and the reply is favorable, we can investigate further."

To this the others agreed, and Frank sat down and wrote his letter. In it he stated that he and his brothers were thinking of buying a small farm for flower growing and asked for more particulars, especially concerning the price, which must be low for cash.

Two days passed, and then came a letter, written in an unmistakable German hand. In it Mrs. Burger, the owner of the place, wrote that Frank had better come out and look at the place, which she had been holding at a thousand dollars, and make an offer. She also added that she would sell cheap if she could fix the matter up and get cash before the twenty-fifth of the month.

The boys read the letter with interest. It was

now the eighteenth, so that there was just a week in which to strike a bargain if they really meant business, as Frank put it.

"I would rather have Dan go up," he said, though. "He knows more about good land than I do."

"Let us all go up," returned Dan. "It won't cost a fortune, and if we really intend to settle down in a place we ought everyone to be thoroughly satisfied."

So it was arranged that they should pay a visit to Spring Hill on the coming Saturday, and a reply to that effect was immediately posted to Mrs. Burger.

The three brothers were now thoroughly enthusiastic on the point of flower growing, especially so as nothing in the nature of a situation in the city had turned up for any of them. Dan, on consent of the others, spent three dollars for books on the subject, while Frank, even more practical, struck up an acquaintanceship with several florists and did odd jobs for them, just for the sake of "catching points," as he put it.

On Saturday they started early for the depot,

and by nine o'clock had crossed the ferry and were on board the train. The ride was a very pleasant one, and they were surprised when the train came to a halt and the brakeman called out the name of their destination.

Spring Hill was a village containing not more than two dozen buildings, all told. There were two general stores and a blacksmith shop, located on the main street, and not far away could be seen the white steeple of a chapel.

They inquired their way to the Burger farm, and then struck out on foot over the still frozen road, with here and there a patch of wet to show that spring was at hand, and that the frost was gradually leaving the soil.

"Ah! it smells good to get out in the country once more!" exclaimed Frank, drawing in a deep breath of the pure and refreshing morning air. "No horrid odors about this!"

"It really makes my lame leg feel better, at least I imagine so," returned Archie. "See how I can get along on it."

And off he strutted in grand style, ahead of the others, for several yards.

“Don’t overexert yourself, Archie,” warned Dan. “You may have a collapse, and then we’ll have to carry you.”

“I would get well out here in no time, I know I would,” said the younger brother, with a vigorous nod of his head. “It’s just simply immense!”

“Well, that would be well worth coming to the country for, without anything else,” said Frank. “But you had better do as Dan says, take it easy.”

CHAPTER VI.

“FIRE!”

ON they went along the road, past half a dozen houses, and then out into the open, with nothing but fields and bushes upon either side. There was a brook to cross, with a rustic wooden bridge, and then came a bit of woods, where the ground was strewn with the burrs of various varieties of nuts.

“If we come out here we won’t want for nuts for the winter,” remarked Frank. “And I just love to sit by a bright fire of a cold night and pick them!”

“Yes, and who knows but what we can gather a lot to sell,” said Dan, who was just then giving financial matters a goodly share of his attention. “To fellows in our situation every dollar would count, for the first year or two.”

The patch of woods was soon left behind, and

then they began to ascend a winding road which led to the top of a round hill sloping for half a mile westward.

Here the bushes grew in profusion on both sides, blackberries, raspberries, wild roses, and a dozen others of which the boys did not know the names, and under them ran wild strawberries. Of course, there was yet not a speck of green to be seen.

"It certainly looks as if almost anything would grow here," remarked Dan, as he took hold of Archie's arm, for the lame boy was now showing signs of fatigue. "It's evidently a good, rich soil, and that is just what we want."

"You are right," replied Frank, as he ranged up upon Archie's other side. "For the richer it is the less we will have to spend in making it fertile. I had no idea fertilizers cost so much till I looked at the prices in the books."

"Those are retail prices," said Dan. "You can get the stuff you want much cheaper by buying directly from the factories where they are made."

"We ought to be almost there," put in Archie

faintly. "I'm sure we have traveled a mile and a half."

"Not a country mile and a half," laughed Frank. "Here comes a boy; I'll ask him."

The boy mentioned was a ragged little chap scarcely eight years of age. He carried a milk pail full of milk in either hand.

"The Burger farm is the next house you come to," he said, in reply to Frank's inquiry. "Say, are you some more folks to buy it?"

"Perhaps," smiled Dan. "Are there many looking at it?"

"Dad's looking at it, and so is Mr. Cassady, but Mr. Cassady don't want to pay much—so I heard marm say."

And without waiting for further questioning the boy hurried down the road.

"Evidently the farm is in demand," commented Dan. "And if that's the case it's likely we won't be able to buy it at our own figure."

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Archie. "I've just been setting my heart on this particular spot."

"So have I," returned Frank. "If the farm is what we want we must manage to obtain it."

They passed a bend in the road, and a second later came in sight of a small cottage painted white and set in the midst of a dozen apple trees. In front of the cottage was a low white paling, with a gate, and a horse-block beside it. On the opposite side of the road was what had evidently the summer before been a corn field, now well plowed up. Back of the cottage, through the bare lower limbs of the apple trees, could be seen a long, low rambling building covered with glass. There were hot-house frames to the left of it, and to the right a barn and several sheds.

"This is the place," said Dan, as they came to an involuntary halt. "See, there are the buildings, and here is the brook of running water she mentioned. What do you think of the place, boys, at a first glance?"

"It's bang up!" cried Frank enthusiastically. "The location couldn't be better."

"It's a lovely place," said Archie. "And how neat it has been kept!"

"The house seems to be in first-class shape,

too," said Dan, as he surveyed it critically. "There are some apple tree limbs resting on the roof which ought to be cut off, but otherwise—— My gracious, boys! what does that mean?"

In sudden excitement Dan pointed to the kitchen window, from which at that instant a thick volume of smoke poured out. A second later the front door of the cottage was burst open and a German woman rushed out, wringing her hands and screaming at the top of her voice:

"Fire! Help! Fire!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT.

FOR the minute the three brothers could do little else but stare at the startling spectacle before them. There was the very house they had come to purchase in flames! It was so totally unexpected that they could scarcely believe the evidence of their own senses.

The cries of the German woman, however, soon gave them to understand that something must be done, and that quickly, if the house was to be saved from total destruction. The thick smoke continued to pour from the kitchen window, and this was followed by a long tongue of flame which blackened the clapboards clear up to the roof.

Crying to his brothers to follow him, Dan dashed forward until he confronted the woman, who was running about the dooryard, wringing her hands and acting altogether as if she had suddenly lost her reason.

“What’s on fire in there? How did it catch?” he asked, as he caught her by the arm.

“Der fat on der stofe ist burning!” she wailed. “Put it owit kvick, oder der whole house vill bren down!”

“The fat on the stove,” repeated Dan to Frank, who was close behind him. “Let us get water.”

“Bring us your pails!” cried Frank. “Hurry up and we may be able to get the fire out.”

“Yah! yah! put it owit, kvick! I get pails, all I haf!”

And off to the cowshed the woman ran, and soon returned with four large milk-pails, one of which was half-full of the lacteal fluid.

In the meantime Dan found a bucket at the well, which was but a few steps from the kitchen door, and filling this he ran into the kitchen and dashed the water where the flames appeared to be the liveliest.

By this time Archie had come up. He took two of the tin pans from the woman and made off for the brook. Full of water the pails were decidedly heavy for the lame boy, but he managed to get them up to the kitchen door, where Dan re-

lieved him and doused the water where it would do the most good.

Frank found a large piece of rag carpet close to the kitchen door, and, catching it up, soaked it in the brook. Entering the kitchen with Dan he threw the carpet over the flames back of the stove, thus extinguishing a large part of the conflagration.

"Good for you, Frank!" exclaimed Dan. "That did the business. Now a few more buckets of water, and we'll have the fire under control."

The water was coming, Archie and the German woman having both rushed to the brook for it. Dan took each pailful and splashed it on all sides. Frank, meanwhile, closed the door leading to the front room of the cottage, which the woman, in her terror, had very imprudently left open.

Inside of five minutes from the time it had started, the fire was out. The entire interior of the kitchen had been blackened and the wood-work behind the stove burned, but further than this no damage had been done.

Dan and Frank were both begrimed with smoke

and perspiration, and their collars, cuffs, and shirts were sadly soiled. But they did not mind this, it was something to have put out the fire and in such short order.

"It's out," said Dan, as he stamped out a few remaining sparks. "It was lucky we got at it as soon as we did."

"We must hunt around in the cracks and make sure of our work," cautioned Frank. "If we don't, it may burst out again."

"You vos goot young mens to put owit dot fire!" cried the woman, as she caught Dan by the hand. "I vos dank all of you very much!"

"You are welcome," returned Dan. "Are you Mrs. Burger?"

"Yah. But I ton't vos known you?" with an inquiring glance first at one and then at another of the trio.

"I am Frank Atherton," replied Frank, stepping forward and doffing his hat. "These are my two brothers Dan and Archie."

Mrs. Burger looked at Frank from head to foot, and then at the others. She was much

taken aback because of Frank's age. She had expected to meet a full-grown man.

"And it vos you wrote to me about mine farm?" she questioned. "I dought it vos a mans."

"We are not quite men yet, but we hope to be some day," smiled Frank. "We are tired of life in New York and want to try our fortunes in the country."

But Mrs. Burger couldn't understand this, and it took a deal of talking on the part of all three of the boys to enlighten her, and even then she was in the dark. But she understood Dan's remark that they would pay cash for the place if it suited and shook them each by the hand and bid them welcome.

"I vos haf cakes and coffee on der stofe for you," she remarked. "But it vos all gone now," and she heaved a mountainous sigh.

"Never mind it, we can do without," returned Dan. "We'll take a wash in the brook and then we'll be ready to talk business."

"All right, I vos git you a towel and soap,"

said Mrs. Burger, and she ran into the cottage again and upstairs.

It was both refreshing and a pleasure to bathe in the cool, flowing water, and all three of the boys felt decidedly better for it. The German woman stood by, keeping up a running fire of questions and exclamations, nearly half of which the boys could not understand.

"Maybe you vos go drough der house first," she said. "I guess dot kitchen can been fixed up midowit much money, hey?"

"Yes, ten dollars will cover it," said Archie, and then he added, after a shrewd glance from Dan: "That is, if there isn't more damage done than we suppose. Maybe it might cost fifty."

CHAPTER VIII.

INSPECTING THE FARM.

MRS. BURGER led the way into the front room of the cottage. This was a pleasant enough apartment, with two windows looking out upon the road and another facing the apple orchard and the open field beyond.

Between the front room and the kitchen was an entryway, and from this the stairs ran to the second floor from one side and another stairs led down to a tiny cellar on the other. Above were three bedrooms, two in front, which were long and narrow, and a third in the rear, having a partially sloping ceiling. All of the rooms had been freshly whitewashed and were as clean as it was possible to make them.

"This suits me," whispered Frank to Dan, and his brother nodded in approval, while Archie's face showed that he, too, was satisfied.

"You ton't vos found no pugs in dis house,"

said Mrs. Burger, with evident self-pride. "I vos clean him mineself."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Frank. "We don't want any bugs."

From the house they proceeded to the barn and the cowshed. The former was empty, and several holes in the roof showed that it had not been repaired for some time.

"I haf no use for him since mine husband died and I sold der horse," explained the German woman. "I vos keep a cow and dot vos all."

Out in the cowshed, a somewhat shaky structure, the cow was found. She was an Alderney, still young, and the German woman declared that she was a good milker.

"You vos haf her, too, of you vont her," she added. "Of not, I vos sold her to der putcher."

"It's a shame to slaughter such a nice animal!" cried Archie. "See her eyes, how soft and brown they are. What do you call her?"

"Mina," replied Mrs. Burger, and Archie patted Mina on the head and made a mental vow that if they bought the place she should remain as a portion of it.

Frank was impatient to inspect the greenhouse, and in speaking of it, learned that the former Mr. Burger had been a great lover of flowers and had spent much spare time in raising them and collecting choice varieties.

"In der house is a pig pox of seeds," said Mrs. Burger. "Dere vos more as fifty different kinds, I dink. I vos leave dot pox of you vonts him."

"Yes, we would want the box by all means," returned Frank quickly. "Are the seeds marked?"

"I dink so. Ve can see ven ve go pack to der house."

The greenhouse met with the approbation of all three of the boys. It was fully fifty feet long by twenty-five wide, with a glass roof that sloped both ways. At one end was a big stove for wood and also a shed containing a number of empty flower pots and an almost unbroken set of florist's tools. Frank picked up the tools one after another and found them in fairly good condition. All the glass in the greenhouse roof was perfect.

"Der dirt ist of der best," said Mrs. Burger,

"Mine husband fixed it up himself. See, how nice and light it vos, and it vos rich, too."

From the greenhouse the little party walked down to the meadow lot behind the barn, and the woman showed where the farm ended, at a clump of cherry trees.

"Ve vill walk around der farm," she said. "Den you vill known oxactly how pig it vos," and off the boys started after her, from the cherry trees along a stone wall to a straight lane which ran past the brook and then up this lane to the road. Across this they went and skirted the cornfield, and then, re-crossing the road, came down along a dense hedge of elderberry bushes, past several beds of strawberry plants and a potato patch, back to the cherry trees again.

"Now you vos seen der blace; vot you dinks of it?" asked Mrs. Burger, as the little party came to a halt, and Archie, all tired out, sank down on a tree stump to rest.

"It is rather small for a regular farm," returned Dan, who did not believe in praising things too much. "But it's in pretty good shape."

"All but the barn," put in Archie, taking his

cue from his big brother. "That needs a new roof."

"Yah, dot is so," returned Mrs. Burger. "But if it vos all new I vos ask more money, hey?" and she smiled broadly.

"I suppose so," said Frank, and then he continued eagerly: "What is the lowest cash price you will take?"

"Vell, as I wrote in der letter, I haf asked a dousand dollar," returned Mrs. Burger slowly. "How soon you vos dake it?" she questioned cautiously.

"We will take it to-morrow and pay cash if we can come to terms," put in Dan. "But we cannot pay a thousand dollars."

"How much you can pay?"

Dan called Frank and Archie aside, and then began a spirited confab between the three.

"I suppose the farm is worth close on to what she asks for it," said Dan. "But we can't afford to pay so much. We have only seven hundred dollars and we ought to keep at least a hundred for working capital."

"I don't think she will sell for six hun-

dred," said Archie. "Not and throw in the cow."

"Then we'll do without the cow," said Frank. But his younger brother would not listen to this, saying the cow would be worth more than her price in milk and butter, not to mention how she would enrich the soil in the greenhouse and the garden.

CHAPTER IX.

PETER CASSADY.

AFTER a long talk among the boys Dan said he would make the offer of six hundred and did so. This at once started Mrs. Burger off in a streak of talking, less than half of which they could understand. She would take eight hundred, and not a penny less, and would leave the cow and all of the tools, and also a barrel of apples, several bushels of potatoes, and half a dozen "sides" of bacon, all of which were stored in the cellar.

They returned to the cottage, and, sitting down in the front room, the matter was talked over until dinner time. Dan frankly told just how they were situated, and what they proposed to do, and Mrs. Burger listened to his story with keen interest, nodding her head vigorously all the while.

"I dink you young mens vill git along," she said. "But I can't vos dake six hundred dollar

—dot vos robbin' mineself. I tole you vot I do—I let you haf it for seven hundred—and dot vos less as I give to ennybody else—but I don't forgot dot you put dot fire out, hey?" and she smiled as broadly as before.

' Dan looked at his brothers, wondering what they would have him do. Frank whispered to Archie and then turned to the older brother.

"Give her six hundred and seventy-five dollars, Dan. That will leave us twenty-five, and we'll manage to get along somehow when we are settled here. Perhaps we can raise a little mortgage."

This was the last offer made, and Mrs. Burger accepted it. To bind the bargain, Dan paid over ten dollars, and for this the German woman gave her receipt, in which she stated that the property was entirely free and clear of all debts and encumbrances. It was decided that Dan should meet her at the county seat on the following day and settle the business, after which Mrs. Burger would turn over the keys and get out just as soon as possible.

By the time this stage of the proceedings was

reached all found that they were getting hungry, and despite the state of the kitchen, Mrs. Burger invited them to remain and have a picked-up dinner with her. They accepted the invitation, and while waiting took another look at what they now considered their own property.

"Isn't it strange!" cried Frank. "I can hardly believe that I own an interest in this tree and that house and this land! It gives a fellow a sort of independent feeling, doesn't it?"

"It does, indeed," replied Dan. "I must say I feel as if I had more of a right to live, somehow. But I can tell you one thing, Frank—there is lots of work ahead, a long hill to climb before we can think of taking it easy."

"Oh, I know it, but I don't care. A fellow takes more interest when he's working for himself and has a positive prospect ahead."

"Yes, I look at it that way, too."

"When shall we move down here?" asked Archie.

"Just as soon as we can—say next Monday or Tuesday. There is no use of wasting time, with spring so close at hand."

As the boys were approaching the house again, a tall, thin-faced man rode up to the gate on a bony horse that limped most pitifully.

"Well, what do you say, widder?" he bawled out to Mrs. Burger, who came from the kitchen to meet him.

"Der blace vos sold, Mr. Cassady," returned the German woman.

"Sold!" ejaculated the thin man, his face falling, and it was easy to see that he was sorely disappointed.

"Yah. Dese young chentlemans have bought it dis morning."

Mr. Peter Cassady turned around in his saddle and scowled at the three brothers.

"These boys?" he said, in astonishment.

"Yah!"

"Humph!" The man turned to Dan.

"What air you goin' to do with the farm?"

"Coming to live on it, sir."

"Got a big family comin'?"

"No, only us three, sir."

"Humph, you don't tell me! Where air you from?"

“We come from New York,” said Frank, with a twinkle in his eyes.

“City boys—and come to live on a farm! You must be crazy!”

“I don’t think so,” said Dan. “Times are hard in the city and we thought to try our luck in the country. We are going to do our best to get along.”

“You’ll find times just as hard here and maybe harder.”

“We are willing to risk it.”

“I was goin’ to buy the farm,” went on Peter Cassady. “I own the one next to it, up the road. Maybe I can buy it yet, widder.” He turned to Mrs. Burger. “Have they paid you the price of it yet?”

CHAPTER X.

MOVING FROM THE CITY.

THE faces of the three Atherton brothers flushed up when Mr. Peter Cassady turned to Mrs. Burger and asked if the purchase price of the farm had yet been paid. It was evident to them that the tall, thin-faced man would do them out of their bargain if such a proceeding were possible.

"No, der brice has not been baid, but——" began Mrs. Burger hesitatingly.

"We have paid enough down to bind the bargain," interposed Dan. "I hold Mrs. Burger's receipt," and he held the paper up.

Cassady's face fell and grew more sour than ever. He looked inquiringly at the German woman.

"Yes, dot vos so," said Mrs. Burger. "Da say da vill bay der rest so kvick as der court babers vos made owit."

“Did ye git yer price?”

“We settled it between us,” cried Frank, who had taken a sudden and strong dislike to the man on the bony horse.

“Oh, well, it don’t make no difference ter me,” sniffed Mr. Peter Cassady. “I don’t want to pry into anybody’s affairs—least of all a new neighbor’s. But three boys, and just from the city! It beats me! I reckon the farm will be up fer sale ag’in before long.”

And, slapping his lean animal on the neck with his hard hand, he proceeded on his way.

“Well, he’s a real agreeable man, I must say,” exclaimed Archie sarcastically. “It’s a pity we’re to have him for a neighbor.”

“Well, we can’t have everything perfect,” answered Dan, pleased to think he had struck what he considered a bargain and a triumph. “We can leave him alone.”

“Dot vos pest,” put in Mrs. Burger, with a wise nod of her head. “Der less you haf to do mid Mr. Cassady der better off you vos—so mine huspant used to said.”

It was late in the evening when the three boys

returned to New York. Before leaving the Spring Hill farm they had had a thorough understanding with Mrs. Burger, and had made out a list of just what was wanted on the place.

"I've got an idea," said Archie, while they were on the ferryboat crossing the North River. "We have only twenty-five dollars left, and ten or fifteen of that will have to go for moving our household goods from the city. What's the matter with selling off some of the things we don't need?"

"I'm willing—providing we can get anything like fair value," replied Dan. "I don't believe in letting things go for a song, though."

"Nor I," added Frank. "Let us make out a list of goods to sell the first thing in the morning and then find out from a number of second-hand dealers just what we can realize from them."

This suggestion prevailed, and after a scanty and hasty breakfast on the following day they set to work with pencil and paper. They walked through the rooms and inspected the contents of the various closets, and jotted down the name of everything they thought they could spare. It

was a sober task, and many a pang went with the putting down of some favorite book, picture, or other luxury of bygone days.

Once Frank picked up the painting outfit which had belonged to his mother, but a single look from Dan and Archie made him drop it again without a word. They would not sell that, no matter what else had to go.

The list finished, they sat down and figured out how cheaply they would sell the things. Their lowest prices footed up to sixty dollars, and then Dan and Frank went out to see what they could do, while Archie turned once more to his task of preparing the midday meal. He had brought a small basket of apples away from the Burger farm, and no sooner had Frank vanished than he rolled up his sleeves and commenced work on his brother's favorite dainty, an apple pie.

It was after twelve when the older boys came back, bringing with them a Jewish second-hand dealer. Mr. Isaacstein looked the goods over critically, and after much talk took the lot for seventy-five dollars spot cash. An hour later his truck carted all he had purchased away.

"Now we have a hundred dollars working capital, after all," said Dan, with much satisfaction, as he dropped into his chair at the table.

"And Archie has made us an apple pie," said Frank; "so what more can we wish for," and he gave his younger brother a smile of thanks.

The boys sat around the dinner table nearly two hours, reviewing the situation and forming plans. To "pull up stakes" and move was not such an easy matter. Besides, when they left the city they wanted to be sure that they would not have to come back again at once, for the car fare, although not large, was still a matter to be considered when money was so limited.

Directly the discussion came to an end Dan rushed off to take the train again to New Jersey, this time with the purchase money safely stowed away in an inside pocket. He met Mrs. Burger as appointed, and went to a lawyer she had selected, and here the necessary papers were drawn up and signed.

Mrs. Burger agreed to move out two days later

and Dan decided that they should move in at the same time. Packing up their effects brought busy times to the boys. They had moved but twice in their lives; so the experience had much of the element of novelty in it.

Anxious to make friends in the neighborhood where they were henceforth to live, Dan hired the local cartman of Spring Hill to come to New York with his biggest team truck and move them. The cartman was John Blody, and from that day on became their warm friend, and from time to time gave them advice which was exceedingly useful to the lads in their new sphere.

It was a warm, clear when they drove up to their own gate, as Frank was particular to express it. Dan sat beside the driver, while the other two were stowed away on a lounge in the rear. Mrs. Burger stood at the horse-block awaiting them. The last of her things had just gone, and she held all the keys of the place in her hand.

“Dare you vos,” she said to Dan, handing over the keys. “And now I vos say goot-by mit vishing you young mans der pest of luck. Dake goot

care of Mina and get rich so kvick as you can alretty!"

And with a hearty handshake all around she left them to settle down in what had formerly been her small but comfortable home.

CHAPTER XI.

SETTLING DOWN TO WORK.

IT was late in the afternoon; so no time was lost in unloading the truck, getting out some kitchen utensils for supper, and setting up a couple of the beds for the night. As soon as this was accomplished John Blody received his pay, ten dollars, and left them to themselves.

“Hurrah!” cried Frank, as the door closed after the cartman. “Here we are at last, ready to make our fortunes cultivating flowers. I declare I feel like a different fellow already.”

And he began to dance and cut up around the kitchen to the great danger of the crockery and glassware scattered about.

“Here, don’t waste your surplus energy that way!” cried practical Dan. “Carry this stuff where it is to go. Goodness knows, there is enough to do.”

"I'm rather tired out," said Archie, whose face was pale from exertion. "But maybe I can stir up some supper——"

"Not a bit of it!" exclaimed Frank. "You just lie down on the lounge and take it easy. I'll put this stuff out of the way and then play cook. You've done more than you should already."

And neither he nor Dan would allow Archie to lift a finger further, knowing he could not stand it.

They felt strange, but happy, when they retired that night, after caring for the cow and locking up carefully all around. It was something to be in their own home, "beat a New York flat all hollow," so Frank declared.

The next day found them all stiff in every joint, Archie especially so, but full of vim and enthusiasm. The two older boys tacked down the carpets and arranged the furniture, while Archie went at the closets. Dan also paid a visit to the general store at Spring Hill and bought provisions for the ensuing week. The store-keeper asked him a good number of questions and smiled incredulously when told the new owners of



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the Burger farm were going to raise flowers for a living.

"It will be uphill work, to my manner of thinking," he said. "Howsomever, I'll help you the little I can if you say so."

On Sunday the boys all dressed in their best and attended service at the white chapel. Here they made a number of acquaintances, nearly all of whom had a pleasant word for them. They were given much advice, good, bad, and indifferent, but not a one among those who spoke to them thought they would succeed in their undertaking.

On Monday they began operations in the greenhouse. While Dan and Frank prepared the soil to receive the seeds and cuttings and looked after the wood stove to be used if the weather turned off cold, Archie went over the seeds brought along and the big box full left by the late Mr. Burger. The box proved a perfect bonanza, but how much of a one the boys did not then realize.

Two weeks of hard work sufficed to see the greenhouse in perfect shape. Dan and Frank had prepared twenty-four long shallow boxes

with the very best soil the place afforded, and into these all three had planted sixteen varieties of flowers and plants. It was too late in the season to put out many seeds, that was, for mercantile purposes, and the others they determined to keep until they could be put outdoors merely for show and for seed, and perhaps for cut flowers.

Yet they had several varieties of verbenas, carnations, mimulus, petunias, sweet peas, and other well-known flowers, as well as beds of heliotrope, coleus, cannas, alyssum, oxalis, smilax, and the like. Of roses they had brought along ten choice cuttings, and from the Burger stock got several dozen more, while out in the garden were more roses and a great number of hardy annuals, some run wild, but all of which would be of more or less use to them.

Dan remembered how his father had planted and cared for many of the seeds, bulbs, and cuttings, but in many cases they had to rely on the several books on floriculture which they had purchased and which each of them studied diligently every evening. The work was a novelty to them and each day passed all too soon.

The weather remained mild for three weeks and then turned off so cold that a constant wood fire had to be kept up in the greenhouse. Frank, whose duty it was to see that the fire did not go out or burn up too hot, was inclined to grumble, but Dan soon quieted him.

“Why, cold weather is just the best thing for us,” he declared. “It will give us a chance to get our plants on the market before the gardens are opened. You must remember that we are a month or so behind the average florists. I think Nature is very kind to assist us.”

And then Frank grumbled no more.

Besides the flowers, the boys set out a large number of tomato plants in hot-bed frames, even going to the trouble and expense of adding to the frames already located down back of the barn. They did this because the storekeeper had promised to find them a market for all the good tomato plants they could turn out in boxes by the first of May.

Archie and Mina the cow had struck up a great friendship, and the lame lad took entire care of the animal. Not only this, he milked her, and

twice a week made the daintiest pat of butter ever seen. At first the work rather tired him, but in the end it was beneficial, and slowly but surely the ruddy glow of health began to come back to his wan cheeks.

When the greenhouse and the hot-beds were in perfect shape the boys turned their attention to the barn and the cow-shed. Nothing could yet be done in the garden, and Dan reasoned that to waste time would be foolish. Some nails, boards, and shingles were procured, and Dan and Frank turned carpenters in earnest, with Archie to assist as much as he was able. Working thus, it was not long before everything but the land was in prime order.

CHAPTER XII.

HARD TIMES.

AT last it grew warmer once more, and from some of the neighbors living about the boys were convinced that the frost was fast leaving the ground, not to return until fall. They made arrangements with a man who owned a horse and plow to turn over two acres for them, and, this done, set to work with renewed vigor to prepare the ground for various vegetables, for they had determined that hereafter they would themselves raise everything used on the table in that line.

"I wish we had some chickens," said Archie. "I would dearly love to go out and gather the eggs."

"We are hardly fixed to keep chickens," replied Dan. "We will have to have a run for them, or they'll be in the garden all of the time. Perhaps in another year, if we have luck, we'll get a few settings."

"And some turkeys," put in Frank. "We

want them for Thanksgiving and the other holidays."

"Oh, yes, if we have chickens we must have turkeys too, and a few pigeons," said Archie.

The two acres plowed up, the three boys found plenty of work hoeing it and cleaning up generally. Then came the all-important question of just what to plant and how much of each. They had peas, beans, radishes, cauliflower, beets, corn, onions, cabbage, and a dozen additional vegetables, as well as pumpkins, squashes, celery, and other things which to them might be considered relishes. Two whole evenings were devoted to staking off the two acres on paper, and then Dan called in a friendly neighbor to ask his advice. The neighbor suggested several changes owing to the rise and fall of the land, and, these made, the boys set to work to plant.

In the meantime, however, they had to live, and it alarmed them somewhat to see their capital steadily diminish, while not a single cent was coming in. What to do should they run out of money ere they realized on their flowers now became a serious question.

"We might take up a little mortgage," suggested Dan. "Or maybe somebody will take our note for three or six months."

"Oh, I hate to borrow!" cried Frank. "This wouldn't seem so much like our own home."

"That's just it," added Archie. "Let's economize."

But to economize further was out of the question. They were already living on next to nothing so far as boughten groceries were concerned. Had it not been for the vegetables and "sides" of bacon and the like left by Mrs. Burger it might have fared badly with them.

"Well, if it comes to the worst, we'll live on just potatoes, as they do in some parts of Ireland," laughed Dan, and there the subject dropped. But they all wondered how matters were going to turn.

So far they had managed to avoid trouble with Peter Cassady, although Dan had had one warm discussion with him regarding the snake fence which divided the two farms. Cassady, shortly after the boys had purchased the place, had attempted to shift the fence some ten feet over on

their side. Dan had resisted, stating Mrs. Burger had assured him she had had the line surveyed, and it was right. The talk had grown very warm, but a happy interruption had called Casaday to his house before matters took a serious turn. Since then the fence had been left alone.

"We must watch him, though," said Dan. "He means to get the best of us—I can see it in his face."

The garden planted, the boys turned again to the greenhouse, where hundreds of tiny plants were struggling to shove their tops through the light soil into the outer world. All were much elated to see that every box of seed had taken hold and was apparently growing well.

"Who says we are not full-fledged florists!" cried Frank proudly.

"Hardly yet," smiled Dan. "Wait till it comes to potting the plants and keeping them free of insects and worms. It is likely we will lose a large percentage of them unless we are extra careful."

"Speaking of pots—we have still to buy them," put in Archie. "That's another expense."

"I know it." Dan gave a sigh. "I don't see what we are going to do, excepting to take a mortgage or give a note."

On the day following the three boys were down back of the barn, looking at the tomato plants in the hot-bed frames, when, chancing to glance into one of the fields, Frank gave a yell of alarm.

"Look at old Cassady's bull!" he cried. "He's in our patch of peas and beans, and he's kicking everything up!"

Frank was right in the main. There was the bull, an old and savage fellow, running around and snorting and making the soil, with the plantings, fly in every direction.

"Wait till I chase him out!" cried Dan, and started off on a run.

"Look out, he may horn you!" exclaimed Archie, in terror. "Mr. Brown said Cassady's bull was the worst he had ever seen!"

But Dan paid no heed. He was bent on saving the garden from further destruction. Picking up a heavy stick from the wood-pile by the barn, he ran on and leaped the fence of the field the bull had entered.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BOYS AND THE BULL.

DAN did not think of the peril he was facing when he made after the vicious bull, but Frank and Archie did, and both called loudly for him to come back.

"The bull will turn on him sure!" gasped Frank. "Come back, Dan; come back!"

"Maybe I had better run to the house and get the gun," said Archie. "He ought to be shot if he tries to molest Dan."

"Yes, get the gun, and I'll do what I can to draw his attention away from Dan," returned Frank.

With his heart beating wildly, Archie set off for the cottage as fast as his lame limb would permit. The shotgun stood behind the kitchen door, already loaded for vicious tramps or thieving crows, and all out of breath he caught it up and started back to the field.

In the meantime Dan had come up to within

fifty feet of the bull without being noticed. Now he waved his club and shouted at the beast.

“Hi! hi! get out of here! Gee! haw! get out!”

The bull stopped his dancing up and down and his kicking and turned swiftly. Dan saw that his eyes were full of rage. Evidently he had broken away from Peter Cassady when the irritable farmer was ill-treating him. He gave a vicious snort, lowered his horns, and dashed full-tilt toward Dan.

For one brief instant Dan thought to stand his ground, then, as the bull drew nearer he leaped to one side, and as the animal blundered past he hit the beast full on the neck with his stick.

The bull bellowed with rage more than with pain, and again turned upon Dan, who once more leaped aside and then ran for the fence, satisfied that to tackle the brute with nothing but a stick was foolhardy.

“Get the gun!” he shouted.

“I’ve got it!” sang out Archie, as he met Dan at the fence, with the bull scarcely a score of feet behind the older youth.

Dan was good at jumping, but now his haste made him miscalculate the distance, and instead of vaulting over he went sprawling down in front of the fence. The tumble surprised even the bull, but not for long. Realizing his opportunity he lowered his horns once again and dashed forward.

Bang!

Never afterward could Archie explain how he brought the gun into position and fired that shot. It was truly a miraculous piece of work, for he had hardly time to think, much less to act. But the gun was pointed and discharged, and the bull stopped short, and staggered back, his head and neck having received fully half of the charge of bird shot.

Scarcely had the gun gone off, and while the bull still wavered, Frank, beside Archie, dropped on his knees and reached for Dan, already on the scramble. A scrape and a hard pull, and Dan came through the lower rails of the fence and rolled out of harm's way.

"Look a-here, don't shoot my bull!" roared a voice from the road, and Mr. Peter Cassady ran

into the garden, a gad in one hand and a long strap in the other.

"You get your bull out of our garden," retorted Frank. "He almost killed my brother."

"That's because you don't know how ter treat him. City chaps aint got no sense, nohow."

"You'll get him out and you'll pay for the damage done here," put in Dan, as he arose to his feet and began to brush his clothing. "You ought to know better than to let him come over here."

"And you ought ter know better'n to shoot at him. If he dies you'll foot the bill, mark my word," growled Peter Cassady, as he leaped into the field.

The bull had retreated, evidently thinking himself no match for Archie's weapon. Peter Cassady advanced upon him fearlessly and prodded him with the gad most viciously. The beast stood his ground for a moment, then ambled towards the gateway, moaning from pain as he went. Once in the road he started for home, and bull and owner disappeared around the bend together.

CHAPTER XIV.

SERIOUS THREATS.

"ARE you hurt, Dan?" was Archie's first question. The younger brother was very pale, and was trembling from head to foot.

"No, thanks to you, Archie. That was a famous shot—it couldn't have been better."

"Dan is right," put in Frank. "It was a good thing you got the gun."

"I wonder if the bull will—will die?" faltered Archie. He hated to think he had shed even a small portion of the animal's blood.

"Don't fear—bulls are too tough for that," laughed Dan. "It would take a good many doses of bird shot to finish him."

"I wonder what Cassady will do?"

"I know what he ought to do—come back here and fix our garden up," grumbled Frank. "Just look at those patches of peas, beans, and lettuce!"

"Yes; it's worse than if it had never been

sown," returned Dan; "for the seed is so scattered it will be all mixed when it grows up. We will have to dig the ground up and plant it anew."

But at present they felt too excited to do anything but talk, and, leaving the garden patch as it was, they walked to the house, there to remain until after dinner. While resting, Mr. Umbert, a neighbor, came along, and they spoke of the matter to him.

"You can have Cassady up before the squire for it," said the neighbor. "He has no right to leave that bull loose, and he's responsible for all damage done."

"I don't want to quarrel with him," said Dan. "If he was a fair-minded man he would come back of his own accord and offer to settle."

As it was getting late in the season no time must be lost in replanting, so directly after the midday meal they set to work. They were hard at work when Peter Cassady strode up.

"My bull is most likely goin' ter lose the sight of one eye," he growled. "Who's to pay for that?"

"See here, Mr. Cassady," replied Dan, as he

faced the mean farmer sternly: "it's your fault that the bull came over here—not ours; and you needn't expect anything from us. On the contrary, you ought to pay for the damage done here. I believe I could make you pay if I went before Squire Hallowel."

"Ha! so ye threaten me with the law, eh?" roared the farmer. "You're a fine lot from the slums of the city, I must say. Maybe ye had to git out!" he went on insinuatingly. "I've often heard as how city folks wasn't no hands to pay their store bills an' the like!"

"You shan't come here and insult us, Mr. Cassidy!" cried Dan, turning first red and then white. "I want you to leave our place, and if you bother us any more I'll bring suit before the squire."

A wordy war followed, but neither Dan nor his brothers would back down, and muttering dire threats against them Peter Cassidy strode off, and that was the last they saw of him for some time.

It took three days to get the garden into trim once more. In the meantime they heard through

Mr. Umbert that the bull was not seriously injured, but that Cassady was "mad clean through" at them.

"If only he would sell out and go away!" sighed Archie. "I would like another neighbor like Mr. Umbert."

"But he won't sell out, so we must make the best of it," replied Dan. "Perhaps after he learns we can stick up for our rights he will let us alone."

It was not long after this that they found it time to commence transplanting some of the greenhouse stuff into pots. The petunias, single and double, were already far advanced, and a dozen other varieties were not far behind. The greenhouse no longer showed long rows of bare dirt boxes—everywhere was green, growing darker each day.

"Well, the pots have got to come," said Dan. "I'm going to hunt around the neighborhood and see what I can pick up second-hand."

Dan's hunt was more successful than he had hoped for. Through the keeper of the general store at which they traded he had heard of a

farmer who had over two thousand pots to sell, of all sizes, the remnant of an investment in floriculture which had proved a failure. The farmer had promised to let them have the pots for half their regular cost, providing they would cart them away themselves, and had agreed to let Frank work out the amount on his farm during haying time that summer at a dollar and a quarter a day. So there was no cash to be laid out, and two thousand pots would suffice them, at least for the start.

CHAPTER XV.

POTTING THE PLANTS.

Two thousand pots, the boys soon discovered, made a good many wheelbarrow loads, and Dan and Frank worked steadily for three days bringing the plants to the greenhouse. As soon as the first load arrived Archie set to work potting the tender plants, which as yet had not more than three or four leaves each.

“Hard work, sure enough,” laughed Dan when he caught Frank rubbing his stiff back. “But one of these days we’ll be rich enough to afford a horse and wagon.”

“That time can’t come any too soon, Dan. How about getting the potted plants to market?”

“Oh, we’ll have to hire John Blody for that.”

When the potting was finished—that is, as far as they could go for the present—the three boys surveyed their work with great satisfaction. They walked around the greenhouse several

times, counting up what they had, and trying to figure up mentally what their first venture at flower raising would net them.

"Don't hope for too much this year," said Dan warningly. "If we pull through without a loss we'll be lucky. You must remember we suffer for last fall's bulbs. Our pinks, for instance, won't amount to anything this season."

Frank, who was down in the corner of the greenhouse examining a box Archie had not touched, called the others to him.

"What is this stuff?" he asked.

"I don't know," declared Dan, looking at the tiny specks of green pushing through the light dirt. "What are they, Archie?"

"I'm as much in the dark as any of you," was the younger brother's reply. "I got the seed out of Mr. Burger's box. He had it done up in a little wooden pill box, and the name on the box was in German. I was curious to know what the seed was, so I planted it."

"It's growing all right," said Dan. "In another week you can pot the plants."

"I'll see what it is first. Maybe it won't be

worth potting," returned Archie. Had he recognized the tiny plants in the box he would have guarded them with more jealous care than aught else in the greenhouse.

The spring was now fairly upon them. The trees around the cottage were budding forth, the bushes were even further advanced. Song birds were coming back rapidly from their sojourn southward.

"Now to make some kind of a deal to sell our flowers," said practical Dan. "I wonder if the New York market is best?"

"I would try that florist I know first," said Frank. "He told me he would do as well as he could by us, when I told him we were coming out here."

"Well, we'll go and see him, and the rest at the same time, Frank. Archie, I am afraid you will have to remain at home."

"Never mind, so long as you make a good deal with somebody," was the younger brother's reply. "You had better ask about cut flowers, too, for I think we are going to have quite a few from Mr. Burger's old bushes."

"Of course; and I'll make arrangements for shipping goods, too," concluded Dan.

Dressed in their best, with several samples set in long baskets, Dan and Frank departed for New York on the first morning train. An hour and a half later found them in the establishment of Randolph Dowling, the florist Frank knew.

"So you really have grown some flowers!" cried Mr. Dowling good-naturedly. He weighed over two hundred, and was in the best of health, so he could afford to be jovial. "Is this all?" and he pointed to the two baskets.

"These are our samples, Mr. Dowling," rejoined Frank, so seriously that the florist at once dropped his banter. "They represent the first year's effort."

"Well, it might be a worse collection, my boy," with a keen, businesslike glance at the stock represented. "You have grown the things which are salable this year, at any rate. Now tell me just what you have got."

An hour devoted to strict business followed. One after another the plants were inspected, and from a slip Dan had written out he told how many

they had of each and in what condition they were.

“Here is something I can’t place,” said Dan, bringing forth one of the plants grown from the seed in the pill box. “We have something like fifty of them.”

Mr. Dowling turned the plant around critically and examined its tiny leaves.

“It is a heliotrope, I believe,” he said slowly. “But I cannot place it further. Certainly it is not a Lemoine or Queen of Night or Celestra, but I imagine it will prove valuable. Leave this sample with me, will you?”

“Certainly,” said Dan. “I hope they will prove valuable—I mean more so than ordinary heliotropes.”

They now got down to prices on the various plants. It seemed to both boys that Mr. Dowling was very fair, yet the sum total was hardly what they had expected.

“Perhaps you may do better elsewhere,” smiled the florist. “I would rather have you get rates—you will be better satisfied.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIRST SALE.

THE boys did go elsewhere—visiting so many establishments that they were nearly ready to drop with fatigue from carrying the heavy baskets. In some places they received but scant attention, and at none were the terms offered quite as good as Mr. Dowling's.

“We had better take him up,” said Dan, “and make arrangements for him to handle our cut flowers, too.”

So they went back, and the deal was quickly closed. Mr. Dowling said he would send word when they were to start shipments, and just how many pots of each were to be shipped from time to time.

“I have been buying from another man in New Jersey,” he added; “but he has gone into the store business on his own account, so if you boys attend

to business we may be able to make contracts for the future."

These were the florist's final words to them, and they talked the matter over on the train and when they got home. The prices obtained were a bit disappointing, but they felt better now they knew exactly what was to become of the stock they were raising.

Archie was much interested to learn the unknown plants might turn out a new variety of heliotrope, and at once set to work to pot all the plants with care. Extra pots were also procured, and when the flower trade opened in earnest the young florists had nearly three thousand plants ready for market.

It was an event to them when John Blody drove up to the horse block and took away the first wagonful of plants. As the load moved off Frank flung his cap in the air.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "Thirty-two dollars' worth of plants for a starter! We're in business now for certain!"

"That's so," said Archie. "Pity we haven't a hundred such loads to ship."

"You wouldn't want to glut the market, would you, Archie?" laughed Dan.

"I'd run the risk, Dan."

They felt in high spirits, and work that day was more like play. It was something to think there was money coming in.

Although giving most of their attention to the flowers, the three lads did not neglect the garden, knowing that that must furnish them with most of their food for the year around.

To protect themselves from possible flower thieves they obtained from Mr. Umbert a small dog. The animal was still young, but knew enough to bark whenever a stranger set foot in the garden, and this was just what they wanted.

One night, after an unusually hard day's work, the three brothers retired early, leaving Carlo, the dog, tied up outside of the kitchen door, where Frank had built him a comfortable house. But a very few minutes saw the boys to dreamland, and thus they slumbered for several hours.

At the end of that time they awoke with a start. A crash of glass followed by a shrill bark from

Carlo had awakened them. One after another they sprang out upon the floor.

"What's that?" demanded Frank, as he ran to a window. "Flower thieves in the greenhouse, as sure as you are born!"

"I'll teach them a lesson!" ejaculated Dan, as he slipped on some clothing, while his brothers followed suit.

In less than a minute all three were piling down the stairs. Dan caught up the gun, and Frank and Archie armed themselves with sticks standing ready for just such an emergency. The kitchen door was thrown open and they rushed out in a bunch.

In the dim light they could see two figures, one near the greenhouse and the second sneaking off towards the barn. As quick as a flash Dan ran after the latter.

"Stop, or I'll shoot you!" he called out.

"Don't—please don't!" came in fearful accents from the fleeing person, as he came to a halt. "It's only me—Sam Cassady!"

Dan was dumfounded. The speaker was Peter Cassady's oldest son, the village's ne'er-do-well.

CHAPTER XVII.

MIDNIGHT VISITORS.

"SAM CASSADY!" murmured Dan.

"Si Cassady!" shouted Frank and Archie simultaneously. "What are you fellows doing over here?"

Si Cassady, the ne'er-do-well's younger brother, looked sheepish and then began to blubber.

"Don't lock us up, Dan Atherton," he wailed. "It aint my fault. Sam planned the whole thing—just to git square on dad's account."

"Planned what whole thing?" demanded Dan, and then before anybody could speak he went on: "Come up to the kitchen, all of you, and, Archie, strike a light, so we can see what we're doing."

Most unwillingly the two Cassady boys shuffled across the dooryard. The older showed a disposition to run away, but Dan seized him by the arm with a grip that several months of hard work had greatly strengthened.

The lamp lit, the Cassady boys were compelled to go inside, and Frank shut the door. Thinking himself now a prisoner beyond all doubts Si Cassady began to fairly bawl, at which his brother became so incensed that he cuffed the frightened lad savagely over the ears.

"Yer aint hurt yet! Shet up; they can't do nuthin' to us!"

"That remains to be seen, Sam Cassady," said Dan warmly. "What were you up to—out with it?"

"Wasn't doin' nuthin'," was the sullen response. "And yer aint got no right to hold us here, neither."

"I reckon we can hold you here until we notify the constable," put in Frank significantly.

"Oh! don't do that, please don't!" wailed Si Cassady. "We only broke a few glasses and some pots, and dad 'll pay for 'em—I know he will."

"So you came over to break the greenhouse glass and smash our flowers, eh?" cried Archie. "You are a couple of bad ones and no mistake."

"It was Sam's plan. He's been wantin' to do it ever since you shot dad's bull."

"But I only shot the bull to save my brother from being horned. Besides, he was tearing up the whole field."

"Dad said yer did it out of spite," put in Sam Cassady. "He says you are tryin' to show off and git ahead of him."

"That is not so. We came out here to grow flowers and make a living. We don't want to get ahead of anyone in particular, and we wish very much to be good friends with all of our neighbors." Dan began to warm up. "See here, Sam Cassady, why can't you people be agreeable? We might get along splendidly—in fact, I know we would."

A sneer arose to Sam Cassady's lips. "You're foolin' now—tryin' ter play a trick on us," he growled.

"Indeed Dan is not," said Frank. "He has often said he wished we could be friends instead of enemies—and I wish the same, and so does Archie. It's worse than foolish to be on the outs; there is nothing to be gained."

The sneer began to leave the face of the ne'er-do-well. "What about our work to-night?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, you ought——" Dan stopped short and looked at his brothers. "What do you say?" he asked.

Frank and Archie exchanged glances, then they motioned Dan aside. There was a whispered conversation which lasted about a minute.

"We have decided to let you go," said Dan. "But you must agree to repair the damage done and promise not to play any more tricks on us."

"You won't report us to the village folks?" asked Sam Cassady eagerly.

"No; we won't say a word about it."

The faces of the two Cassady boys were studies for a moment. At first suspicious, they gradually grew sheepish and full of a certain sense of shame.

"You're better fellers than I thought yer was," said Sam Cassady in a low tone. "Me and Si will mend the greenhouse and bring yer new pots fer the ones we broke, and yer needn't be afraid of us no more, neither."

A few minutes later the strange interview came to an end, and with a good-night that was almost friendly the two Cassady boys left the cottage and stole home through the darkness.

The adventure and the generous manner in which the three boys acted were productive of much good. As they afterward learned, the absence of Sam and Si from home had been discovered by their parents, and when they returned sharp questioning compelled the lads to make a full confession of their misdeeds. Mr. Peter Cassady and his wife were much worried over what Dan and his brothers might do, scarcely believing they would let the matter rest as it stood. When they finally did see that the three Athertons meant to stick to their promise a better feeling prevailed all around, and from that time on the whole Cassady family were gradually won over until they became the best of neighbors.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ENCOURAGING NEWS.

SPRING was now so far advanced that it might well be said summer was at hand. The greenhouse was empty, with the exception of a few plants which they wished to hasten in their growth. Everything was up in the garden, and the berry bushes were loaded down with their green fruit.

The first load of plants for Mr. Dowling had been followed by five others, and up to date the young florists had disposed of a hundred and twenty dollars' worth of their wares. Ten or twenty dollars' worth still remained, and then all they would have to depend upon would be the cut flowers. The tomato plants had brought them in twenty-two dollars' worth of groceries at the general store.

Of course the hundred and twenty dollars was not clean profit. The pots had still to be worked

for, and they had bought glass for the greenhouse, and also fertilizer, as well as tobacco extract, fir-tree oil, and several other preparations with which to free their plants of bugs and insects.

"I've figured it out," said Dan one night. "We'll come out about eighty dollars ahead on the plants, and I imagine the cut flowers and other things will bring the total up to about a hundred and fifty dollars. I don't think that's so bad for a first year."

"Especially as we have all of our garden truck free," replied Archie. "We'll pull through, won't we?"

"We will unless we have some extra expense coming unexpectedly, Archie. Of course, the flowers are not cut yet."

"We need clothing," put in Frank dubiously. "Farm work just wears 'em right out."

"Yes, we need clothing and boots too," answered Dan. "But we'll have to wait for them. We don't want to run into debt, now we have kept above water so long."

The three brothers realized that, even though

their plants had turned out so well, they would have to economize "to the last notch," as Archie expressed it. New clothing was not to be thought of, and their boots would have to be sent to the village cobbler to be mended for a second time.

Life in the country had done wonders for Archie. His lameness was about gone and he was twenty pounds heavier. Dan, too, was no longer pale and thin, and Frank's appetite, always good, was simply tremendous.

A week of unusually warm weather in June ended late one afternoon in violent gusts of wind and a dense blackness of clouds in the western sky. Just at sunset the low rumble of far-off thunder reached their ears.

"We're going to have a thunder storm—the first of the season," said Dan. "Get everything under cover you want to keep dry."

There was not much to get in, and this was a lucky thing, for the rain began to fall in a very few minutes. Then the clouds rolled swiftly overhead, and the lightning flashed brighter and brighter.

Sitting in the kitchen the boys watched the on-coming of the storm. Archie had supper ready, but they felt in no humor to eat—a strange apprehension having seized all of them.

“My, but it’s going to be a corker!” murmured Frank, as the rain drove against the window pane in a perfect sheet. “The garden will be pretty well washed out.”

“I don’t like that lightning,” said Archie, with a slight shiver. “I wish those apple trees were further from the house. They say trees draw the lightning.”

“Not more so than anything else that’s wood,” said Dan.

“I wonder how Mina takes the storm,” said Archie, thinking of his old favorite in the barn. “I’m glad I drove her in before it started.”

“Oh, cows are used to storms,” rejoined Frank. “They don’t mind them——”

While Frank was still speaking a broad sheet of lightning filled the kitchen, dazing them and causing them to fall back in a heap. A grinding and splitting crash of thunder came with the flash,

and the boys smelt a faint odor of sulphur in the air.

Crash! went one of the apple trees outside, and then they heard its top fall upon the shingle roof and break through into the garret.

"The house is struck!" gasped Archie. "Oh, Dan!"

"Is anybody hurt?" demanded the older brother. "Frank, are you all right?" For Frank had been nearest to the window.

"Yes. But the house—can it be on fire?"

"I'll look!" shouted Dan, and ran for the stairway, with his two brothers at his heels.

There was no need to climb up the ladder into the gabled garret, a small place they had not attempted to utilize. The top of the apple tree had broken clear through the plaster into one of the front bedrooms, and now stuck out, crushed and blackened, in bold relief against the whitewashed wall. Through the jagged hole the rain was already pouring.

Satisfied there was no danger of fire and somewhat recovered from their first shock, the boys lit a lantern, it being impossible to keep a lamp lit in

the draught. Then Archie dashed downstairs to obtain a large tin basin, in which to catch the falling water, that it might not do further damage.

"This is the worst yet," said Dan soberly. "I suppose I ought to get up and try to mend the roof."

"Don't go in this storm!" pleaded Archie. "The water is all coming down in one spot, and we can catch it easily enough."

"That was a close shave!" cried Frank. "My gracious! I thought the end of the world had come."

They stood around silently after this, hardly knowing what to do. The storm was moving off, and presently the thunder and lightning almost ceased. By ten o'clock the rain began to slack up, and an hour later it stopped altogether and the stars came out.

The three boys did not sleep a wink during the night, and at the first sign of daylight they went outside to inspect the damage done. They found that the largest of the apple trees had been cut off twenty feet from the ground, and the top portion

hung horizontally from the branches below and the roof of the house.

"We'll have some work chopping that down," said Frank. "We'll have to rig up a block and tackle to lower it, or it may smash some more of the house."

"I reckon we can manage the log," said Dan. "What worries me is that hole in the roof. It will cost us twenty or thirty dollars, and perhaps more, to put things in shape again."

This remark made them feel gloomy. It had been such a close struggle they did not see how they could stand the extra expense. They saw that they could not do the work themselves; that it would require the services of one or two regular carpenters.

"It's too bad, that's just what it is!" cried Archie, and the others echoed the sentiment.

"There is no use to cry; we must make the best of it," said Dan bravely. "I'll go down to the village and see Jacob Voss the carpenter."

And after a hasty breakfast he set out, hoping to have the work done before another storm came along. He found the village carpenter and a con-

tract was made, and Jacob Voss set to work that day, and then Dan wrote to Mr. Dowling for some more money with which to pay the bill.

The mail the day following brought a check, which Dan had cashed at the general store, and also a long letter from Mr. Dowling, a portion of which filled the boys with sudden hope.

“I am very much interested in the growth of that heliotrope you left with me,” he wrote. “It seems to be of an entirely new variety—possibly a cross between an *Incanum* and *H. Peruvianum*, although there is also some other trace in it. One thing is certain, it is going to turn out well, and I would advise you to hold onto every plant you have, and not let any of the seed go. Mine is just beginning to bud. If you have any still further advanced, send it along so that I can show it to several other experts.”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NEW HELIOTROPE.

“A NEW variety of heliotrope!” cried Archie, when shown the communication. “How glad I am that I planted the seeds from the pill box! The plants may be worth a fortune!”

“Hardly that,” smiled Dan, yet also enthusiastic. “But they may be worth a neat penny. Let us look at them.”

And, accompanied by Frank, they went down in the corner of the garden where Archie had placed the pots. A surprise awaited them. Two of the plants were in bloom. The clusters of flowers were of light and dark blue, and exceptionally thick, while the perfume was exquisite.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” said Dan suddenly. “I’m going to take those two plants to New York to-morrow and find out just what

there is in this. Mr. Dowling is a conservative man and would not write such a letter unless there was a lot back of it."

As anxious as Dan, the others readily agreed to their elder brother's proposition, and on the following morning the plants were packed with exceptional care, and Dan set off.

Archie and Frank remained about the cottage, aiding the carpenter as much as lay in their power. Although neither would say so, both were burning up with anxiety concerning the heliotropes. It meant so much to them to prove the flowers of value.

The afternoon wore along, and still Dan did not come, although several trains from the metropolis had stopped at the Spring Hill station. The early evening found the boys still waiting.

"He stays pretty long," said Frank, after the carpenter had gone home. "I wonder if he is putting all this time in on those plants?"

At last they heard the whistle of the last evening train. Dan must be on that, if he was coming at all. They walked down the road to meet him.

"There he is!" suddenly cried Archie. "See, he is waving his cap!"

"Had to wait to see two experts," declared Dan, as soon as they came up. "And I've been over to Brooklyn and Jersey City, too."

"But the heliotropes—what of them?" asked Archie eagerly.

"Worth five dollars apiece—and more, Archie."

"Five dollars apiece!" ejaculated Frank. "Why we have forty-six of them."

"One of the big flower growers from Jersey City offered two hundred and fifty dollars for the lot—if we would promise not to give any seed to anybody else," went on Dan.

"Oh, Dan; it is a small fortune!" cried Archie joyfully.

"Did you accept?" asked Frank.

"No; I said I would have to consult you two first. Mr. Dowling advised me to keep all of the plants, and only let the flowers go this season. Then we are to raise all we can next season and 'capture' the market, as he put it. Come on to the house, and I'll tell you all about it."

Never were a trio happier than the Atherton boys as they sat down in the kitchen and ate supper and talked the matter of the new heliotrope over. Dan had much to tell and Frank and Archie were close listeners.

"In the future Mr. Dowling says he will back us," said Dan. "He is coming out next Saturday to stay until Monday, and then he says we can come to terms. He predicts that we will prosper in our new occupation."

The experts had placed the new heliotrope, giving it a Latin name Dan declared was a yard long. "We'll want another name," he said. "What shall it be?"

"Let us call it the Lady Grace," said Archie.

The others instantly agreed, for Grace had been their dear mother's name.

And with the naming of the new heliotrope let us leave them, assured that a modest prosperity will surely come to them.

WALTER LORING'S CAREER.

CHAPTER I.

A DEED OF MYSTERY.

BANG!

The report of a pistol rang out sharp and clear through the woods, causing the boy who lay dreaming by the brookside to rise up with a bound.

"Hullo, what does that mean?" he asked himself, as he listened. "Can someone be hunting here? There's no game that—oh!"

He broke off short in his soliloquy. Looking across the brook, he had seen a situation which filled him with quick terror.

Two men were quarreling—both rather elderly—the one short and stout, the other tall and thin, with a fox-like cast of countenance.

The tall man, who held a smoking pistol, as the boy gathered, was urging that something should

be given up to him, which the stout man refused. Hot words passed, when suddenly the tall man, who was obviously much excited, snatched out a revolver and leveled it at his companion, who stood motionless with astonishment and terror.

The spot was a lonely one, no unfit place for a murder, and that a murder was about to be committed Walter Loring did not doubt. With a shout he sprang from his place of concealment dropping the bag he held as he did so, and bounded down the bank.

At that moment the revolver was discharged a second time, and the man who had fired it, with an exclamation sprang up the opposite bank and plunged into the wood.

The stout gentleman staggered backward and sank on the grass by the roadside. He was gasping for breath.

"Are you much hurt, sir?" cried Walter, in no small alarm.

Some seconds, perhaps minutes, passed before the gentleman could return any answer, and in broken sentences he then gave him to understand that he had been in no way injured by the shot.

That his present distress was from natural causes; that he was liable to such attacks if agitated, and that he should probably be right again in a short time.

He gladly accepted the offer of Walter's arm to the top of the hill at the edge of the wood, which fortunately was not far distant.

But before they reached it the gentleman, who had by this time fully recovered his breath, thanked Walter in a courteous manner for the timely help which he had rendered him.

"I am glad I happened to be there, sir," said Walter, who was not a little excited by the adventure. "Is there anything else I can do? By running across the fields I can get to the police station and give the alarm much sooner than you."

"That chase may be given to the gentleman who had the little altercation with me? No, thank you, I would not have him interfered with on any account. There is but one thing which you can do to be of service to me, and that is to make no fuss about what you have seen. Don't spread a report that you have witnessed an at-

tempted murder, or anything of that kind. There has been no such thing."

Walter opened his eyes in amazement.

The gentleman noticed that he looked surprised, and went on: "That person is an old acquaintance of mine, and our dispute was such a one as might have arisen between friends. Oh, yes, quite a friendly dispute. You may be sure that he had no intention of injuring me with that foolish revolver, but he was excited. It went off purely by accident."

"But he shot twice."

"Not at me, my boy. He—that is—you are mistaken, I assure you. Don't get any romantic idea into your head, my fine lad, that you have saved my life; but, still, you have been very useful to me, for which I am in your debt." And, drawing his purse, he held out a five-dollar bill.

The value of the reward caused Walter to hesitate. Never yet in his life had he called so much cash his own. There was, however, no reason, so far as he could see, why he should refuse it.

He took it, and was expressing his acknowledgment, when the gentleman, who meanwhile had

been looking keenly at his face, demanded abruptly, "What is your name—not in any way related to a family named Blarcomb, eh?"

"Not that I know of, sir. My name is Walter Loring."

"I am glad we have met. My name is Archibald Romaine, and I am a Boston contractor. I am stopping at the tavern in the town and would be pleased to have you call this evening. Good-by."

And a moment later Mr. Archibald Romaine disappeared up the road alone.

"What can it all mean?" asked Walter of himself as he turned back in the direction in which his home lay.

Walter was left in a state of no small perplexity. The current of his uneventful life had been strangely disturbed by the occurrence of that afternoon. The scene he had witnessed, and the light in which Mr. Romaine wished to have the affair considered, were wholly inexplicable to him.

His mind, too, was exercised with another point—how came it that the Boston gentleman

noticed in him a resemblance to some person named Blarcomb? There would have been nothing in this, taken by itself, but the name of Blarcomb, though he knew no one called by it, was already and curiously familiar to him. In his home there were books in which it was written, and there were household articles marked with it; and he now remembered that whenever in a childish way he had asked an explanation of his mother she had always avoided the question.

Little did the boy dream of the truth and of all that was to happen to him in the near future.

CHAPTER II.

MORE OF A MYSTERY.

WALTER LORING was a poor boy who lived with his mother in one of the least aristocratic sections of the pretty town of Billbury. The two were alone in the world. They had settled there when Walter, now entering his sixteenth year, had been but an infant. A stranger, and coming to so humble a home, the lonely woman had attracted little attention from the more prosperous townsfolk. To be sure, the doctor and the minister, whose professional duties brought them in contact with her, were of opinion that from her manners she must have known better times. But she made no acquaintances, and devoted herself to her boy, to whom the public school of the town enabled her to give such an education as would not otherwise have been within her reach.

Mrs. Loring was waiting tea for her son.

Though probably not more than forty, her hair was already gray, and she had a careworn look.

But she had a gentle and loving smile for Walter. "You are back just at the right moment," she said. "Did you get the herbs you set out for?"

"No, mother, I—I—got them and then forgot them," he stammered. He did not know what to say.

"Why, Walter, what's the matter?" cried Mrs. Loring. "You are hiding something. Surely my son has not been doing anything that he is ashamed of?"

Walter was his old straightforward self again in a moment. "You are partly right, mother; there is something I did not want to tell you, for it is the affair of another person who wished nothing said about it. But I have done nothing to be ashamed of, mother—you may rest sure of that."

Mrs. Loring's eyes were fixed on him as he spoke; but there was no trace of deceit in that bright, frank face.

"I know I can believe you, Walter," she said.

"You may, mother; and I will tell you as much

about the matter as I can. A gentleman had a misadventure in the road just by where I was resting. It might have been serious if I had not been near. I dropped the herbs when I ran to him. He did not wish the matter talked about, he said; but I can show you what he gave me." And Walter drew out his five-dollar bill.

"Five dollars! You must have done him a considerable service to have earned so large a reward. Was he one of our neighbors?"

"No, a stranger; he told me his name was Romaine."

"Romaine!" repeated Mrs. Loring, for whom the name seemed to have some especial interest.

"Yes; he was a Boston contractor, he said."

"I have known something of a Boston gentleman of that name," replied Mrs. Loring, with an amount of agitation in her voice which her son did not notice as he went on:

"And what do you think he asked me, mother? Whether I had any relations called Blarcomb. I was so much like somebody of that name. Curious, wasn't it?"

"I feel sure it is the Mr. Romaine I knew. I wish you had not taken his money, Walter."

"Why not, mother? He seemed like a pleasant, good-natured gentleman. He is staying at the Billbury tavern. He asked me to visit him to-night, and tell him about myself. He is inclined to be friendly."

Mrs. Loring leaned forward, and looked earnestly across the tea tray into her son's face. The mention of this stranger's name seemed to have moved her deeply. "My boy," she said, "you must not go to him. We must take no favors from this man. Give me this money—it must be returned to him. Stay, you shall write a note, saying that your friends—your friends, mind, not your mother—do not approve of your retaining it."

Mrs. Loring said no more. The supper finished, the note was written and sent by a neighbor who was going to town. But Walter could not rest over the matter.

"Mother, what is this Mr. Romaine that you dislike him so much; was he mixed up in my father's affairs? I ought to know all about my

father and about ourselves. I am old enough to understand—I am no longer a child.”

Mrs. Loring looked up. Tears were streaming from her eyes.

“Walter, you shall hear everything some time. Soon enough for your own sake, my boy—soon enough! But not now—I cannot and must not tell you now.”

She rose and hurriedly left the room, leaving the boy more mystified than ever.

CHAPTER III.

THE ATTACK IN THE WOODS.

WALTER felt restless, and, having a desire to walk, determined to revisit the woods and secure the bundle of herbs, and also a bag of nuts he had left behind.

He reached the point where the descent began, and looked down the broad slope of curving roadway, shadowed on each side by the dark trees of the wood. Not a person was in sight, and very silent and gloomy it seemed. Walter did not want for courage, but where will you find an imaginative boy of fifteen who will have no uneasy feeling in such a place at such a time?

The road grew darker as he descended. Not even from the remotest distance was the cheerful sound of wheels or hoofs to be heard; the silence was only broken by the occasional hooting of an owl, deep in the wood.

He was now near to the scene of the afternoon's

adventure, and on the same side of the road, where a spreading oak stood on the top of the bank, casting a deep black shadow across the way. Within this shadow Walter fancied that he could make out something still darker—a human figure—which seemed to him to glide up the bank and into the thicket.

So much was he impressed with the reality of this that for a moment he stood still. Then, laughing at himself for indulging in such fancies, he ran past the oak and its shadow, and bounded up the bank to the point where, in the afternoon, he had sprung out into the open.

Suddenly he stopped in his search for the nuts and herbs and raised his head to listen—there was a little rustling noise in the bushes near, but it ceased.

“Only a rabbit,” thought Walter, and he went on feeling upon the ground.

Again there was a slight noise, and this time he could have said certainly that it was a stealthy footstep. He would have sprung up and taken to his heels had there been time, but as he was in the act of rising he felt a firm grasp laid on his

shoulder. A moment later he was standing face to face in the darkness with some unknown person who was clutching him tightly.

Who his captor was Walter could not tell, but the feeling uppermost in his mind was that it was the tall man of the revolver. And this impression was not reassuring, for whatever Mr. Romaine might say, Walter had felt sure that murder was intended.

"What are you here for, young fellow?" The speaker was plainly a stranger to the neighborhood, and the voice sounded like that of an educated man. Walter was sure that his suspicions were correct.

"I had lost something—and came to look for it," he answered as best he could.

"Lost something, eh; and what may you happen to have lost?"

"Only a bag of nuts and some herbs."

"Really?" was the sarcastic answer. "See here, you are the meddlesome young jackanapes who thought proper to interfere in the little dispute between my friend and myself. Yes, I had a particular wish to speak with you. I saw your

stuff before you were well out of hearing, and was sure you would come back for it, and waited. I had almost given you up, but here you are—trapped at last.”

Walter had no answer to make. For what could this man want him, save to take revenge on him for thwarting him in his crime? He felt his peril to be great.

“And now that you are here,” the stranger went on, “tell me about him.”

“About whom, sir?” faltered Walter.

“About him—my friend, who was hurt by the accidental discharge of my revolver; was he badly wounded?”

“Oh, no; he was not hurt at all.”

“Ah!—he seemed to be hurt. I saw him fall.”

“He was only frightened and faint, sir. He was not hit.”

“That is well, very well,” and Walter felt his captor’s grasp relax somewhat as he said this. “You saw him to the top of the hill—you talked with him—what steps is he taking?”

“I do not quite know what you mean, sir?”

“Yes, you do! Answer me!”

With a fierce look in his eyes, the man caught Walter by the throat.

"Let me go! Help! help!" gasped the boy.

"Silence, you fool. Take that and keep quiet."

In his hand the man held a stick. Raising it, he struck Walter on the head.

The blow was evidently harder than intended, for with a groan Walter staggered back and fell to the grass like one dead!



WALTER FELL TO THE GRASS LIKE ONE DEAD. P. 120.



CHAPTER IV.

WALTER OBTAINS AN OPENING.

WITH a long-drawn sigh Walter opened his eyes and sat up. Where was he? What had happened?

It was several minutes before he came fully to his senses. Then he looked around in the semi-darkness. He was alone, his assailant had vanished.

With an aching head he picked up his bag of nuts and the herbs and started for home. His thoughts were busy, but they brought him to no satisfactory conclusion.

The next morning at the usual hour Walter started for school. Directly in his way, which was up the main street of the town, stood the tavern. He slackened his pace as he approached the gate leading into its yard, in the hope that he might learn something further of the Boston contractor.

Fortune favored him, for at that instant two

acquaintances, both of his, were emerging from the stables. They were old Archer the mail carrier and Ben, his son. Walter turned into the yard to speak with them.

Ben was Walter's friend. I wish the reader to know something of him, for we shall have more of his company by and by.

At the present moment, however, it was rather to the elder Archer that Walter addressed himself. Yes, Sam could tell something about the Boston man. He had driven him and another gentleman—a dark man, rather tall—to a certain small village seven miles to the west; he thought they went on law business. He had heard the dark gentleman's name, and believed it was Barker.

"Did this Mr. Barker," Walter inquired, "come to the tavern last night?"

"No."

"And where is Mr. Romaine—still here?"

"No; he left for Boston by the early morning train."

Walter said no more, and, fearful of being himself questioned, continued on his way to school.

The whole of Walter's schoolboy life had been passed at this place; he was now among the foremost scholars, and was believed to be Mr. Stanton's prime favorite.

The old schoolmaster was proud of his pupil's abilities. He believed that he would raise himself in the world; and he was perhaps all the more inclined toward him because he was poor and friendless. He would sometimes in an evening drop in at Mrs. Loring's cottage that he might talk to the widow of her son's prospects. He gave it as his opinion that Walter's mother was more of a lady than were many mistresses of big houses in Billbury, and Mr. Stanton, notwithstanding the humdrum life he led, was a gentleman of birth and culture, and knew what he talked about.

When the work of the morning was over, and the boys leaving, Mr. Stanton beckoned Walter to his desk.

"Loring," he said, "here is a letter for you to take to your mother, which I received from Boston this morning. It concerns you; it is about the situation which I thought might suit you.

Tell your mother that I will call in the evening and talk the matter over with her."

Walter knew what the opening was to which Mr. Stanton referred. In those consultations at the widow's cottage above alluded to it had been agreed that it was now time for him to make a start in life. His own leanings were in the direction of art; his earnest desire was to be a sculptor. But when he had said this his mother had looked grave, and Mr. Stanton had shaken his head. Mrs. Loring was not without that high estimate of her son's talents usual in mothers, but she was unable to maintain him through a course of art studies. And the schoolmaster, though he knew very little about art as a profession, held the belief that without money or a patron a young artist would have little chance in his struggles with poverty. His more practical idea was to get the youth into some Boston office where he might at once be able to support himself.

Walter's good sense and good feelings both told him that Mr. Stanton was right. He declared himself ready to give up his own wishes, and the schoolmaster promised that he would,

through his friends at the Hub, look out for some fitting berth.

One had been heard of which promised to be especially suitable. It was in the office of a decorator in considerable business. Besides writing and accounts, a knowledge of drawing would be needed, so that in a humble way Walter would have play for his artistic power. It was expected to be vacant a few weeks later.

The letter given to Walter was, however, to say that if he accepted this post he must enter on it at once.

When Mr. Stanton came in the evening, he found that Mrs. Loring, though somewhat disconcerted by so sudden a summons, had consented to let her son go, whilst he, as was natural to a lad of his years, was eager to be off.

"Walter is young," said Mr. Stanton, "to be alone in the great city of which he knows nothing. Has he no relatives—no uncles or aunts, say—under whose care he might live?"

"No," replied Mrs. Loring hurriedly, as though frightened by the question. "He has none."

“That is unfortunate. As I was under the impression that you were from Boston, I hoped it had been otherwise.”

“I had no brother. My only sister was older than myself. She married and went out West whilst I was still a girl. I have long since lost sight of her.”

“And has he no friends on the father’s side?” persisted Mr. Stanton.

Mrs. Loring colored a little, and hesitated. “No,” she said, “he has no friend who could care for him. I must trust my boy to Providence and his own good principles.”

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE MEETING.

THREE days later Walter was on his way to Boston. The train was an accommodation stopping at every station. Soon a union station was reached, and here came a ten minutes' wait.

To stretch himself, Walter walked out on the station platform. As he did this, he caught sight of a figure he fancied he knew.

"Who can it be?" he thought. "If I—ah! It's the man who struck me—and he's got a false beard!"

Walter looked so sharply at the fellow that Barker at last came toward him.

"Young man," he said, "am I an acquaintance of yours that you stare at me in this manner?"

"I beg your pardon," stammered Walter, taken back by the man's audacity.

"I asked whether you were under the impression that you were acquainted with me."

"Yes; it was you that struck me down in——"

"What! You are crazy. We have never met, and that you will have the goodness to remember."

This was said with a threatening air. In this conversation the object of Mr. Barker was obviously to strike fear as far as possible. To Walter's no small disquiet, those sharp eyes were fixed on his face in silence for some seconds; then Barker said abruptly, "Did you tell me your name was Blarcomb?"

That name again. Walter gave a start at hearing it, which did not escape the other.

"No, sir; my name is Walter Loring."

"And what, Walter Loring," asked Barker, with something of a sneer in his voice, "may you happen to be doing here?"

"None of your business, sir."

"Very well. And now, young man," said Mr. Barker, "a word of warning to you. I am here and there and everywhere, and shall have my eye upon you. You will remember to keep silence about all events in which you suppose me to have had any concern, and you will remember that you

and I have no acquaintance whatever. You hear——”

What more he might have added it is hard to say, for at that instant the train began to move off and Walter had to run to get aboard.

He was more puzzled than ever. What had Barker meant by asking him if his name was Blarcomb?

But his meditations were interrupted when he reached Boston and found himself on the busy streets bound for the business establishment of Martin Pomeroy, decorator and furnisher.

He soon reached the place, on a lane off of the street. There was an alley to one side, filled with marble, tiling, and packing cases. Beyond was the “office,” a ten by thirty affair.

Walter knocked on the door.

“Come in,” cried a strong, decisive voice, and Walter entered. It was a kind of office, with windows on one side, and against these was a long and wide sloping table—a kind of huge desk—beside which stood a shrewd-looking man of perhaps fifty, with a pencil in one hand and a T-square in the other. This was Mr. Pomeroy.

"I am Walter Loring, sir."

"Um!" was Martin Pomeroy's answer. He looked Walter over carefully. "Glad you are punctual to your time, Loring. That is the right way to begin. Mr. Stanton sends me a good report of you. I expect you to act up to it. Sit down."

"I shall try to do my best, sir," said Walter, taking an old-fashioned easy chair standing near.

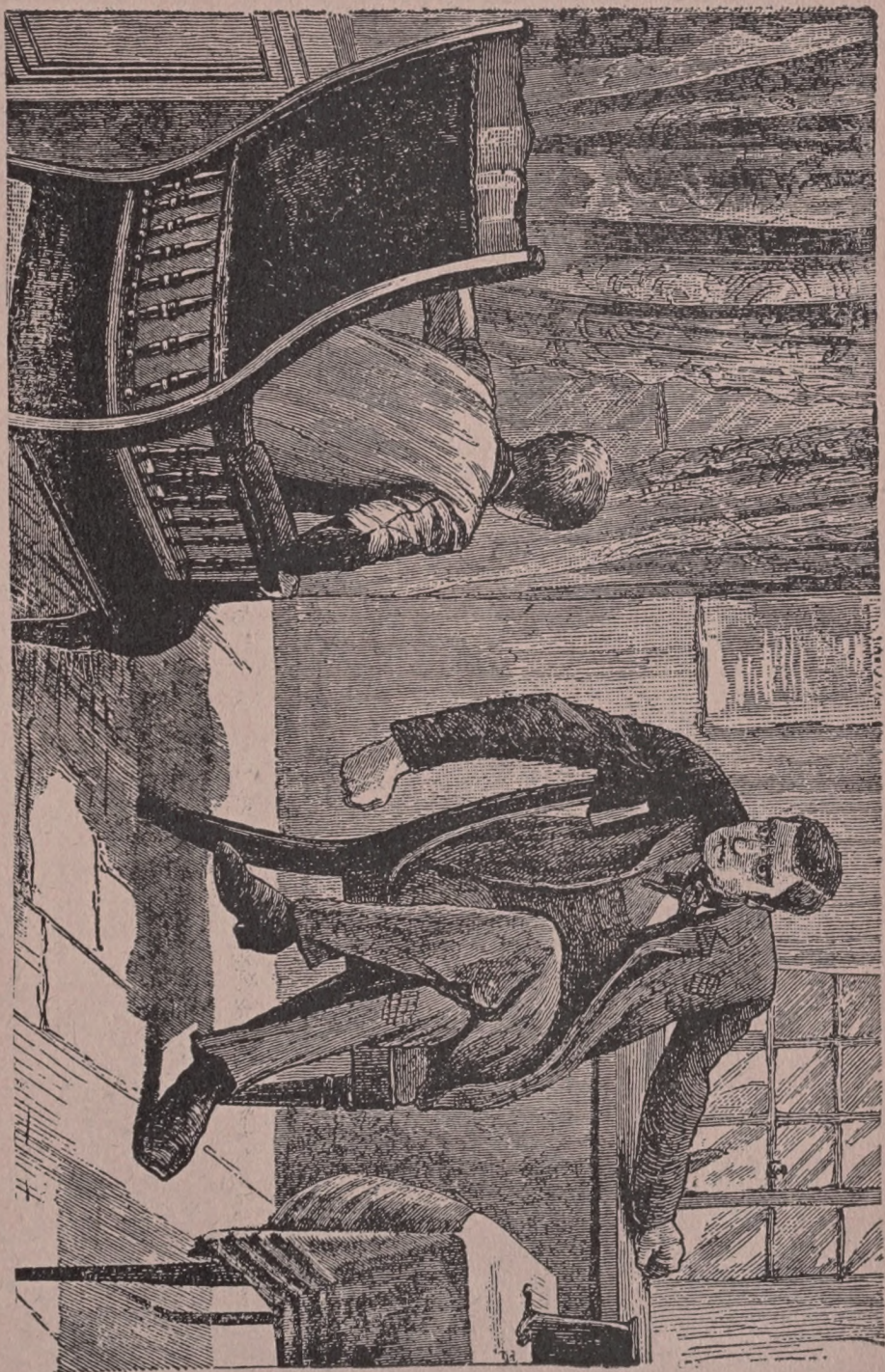
"Just so," rejoined Mr. Pomeroy, "for if you don't you won't stay long with me. For seeing whether my people do their work as it should be done, my eyes are as good as those of most men, though I do wear spectacles. Now, are you ready to turn in to business at once?"

"Quite, sir, if you wish it."

"That is well. The young man who has left me was behind time two mornings running. He had to leave, and work is in arrears. Step this way."

Mr. Pomeroy led the way to another office, in which the arrangements were much the same as in his own.

"These plans have to be copied," he said. "I



learn from Mr. Stanton that you are quick at mechanical drawing; let me see how much you can get done by six o'clock."

Walter looked at the work, and saw that he was quite equal to dealing with it; yet when the door closed on him and he was left to his labors he felt anything but happy. Mr. Pomeroy was, it seemed to him, a hard man, whom it would never be possible to like.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEATH—IS THE SECRET LOST?

WALTER secured a boarding place that was comfortable if not elegant, and went to work to do his best.

Among the interests and surroundings of his new life, it is probable that the affair in the Billbury woods, with all the mysteries and perplexities which surrounded it, might have slid back into the past and been almost forgotten, had it not been for the strange behavior of Mr. Barker at the railroad station meeting.

That interview had made a strong impression on Walter. He was no coward, yet this man's threat, that his eye would be upon him, was a source of secret uneasiness to our friend. Not infrequently, when he was abroad after nightfall, a feeling would creep over him that Barker might be dogging his footsteps. Sometimes he would

even fancy that he could distinguish his form or his dark face; but this probably was mere fancy, for through this period he could never have said with certainty that he had seen him.

Occasionally, when the thought of Barker haunted him, he half wished that he had known where to find Mr. Romaine, from whom, perhaps, some elucidation of the mystery might have been obtained; but loyalty to his mother's wish, that he should avoid that gentleman, forbade his taking any steps to find him.

Months went by and nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Walter worked hard, and studied in the evening such works as he could obtain at the free library.

He received a letter every week from his mother, but one week none came—instead there was a letter from his friend the schoolmaster.

His fingers trembled as he tore off the envelope. As he feared, the letter told him that his mother was ill. It was desirable that he should come to Billbury at once. Mrs. Loring had spoken of some important communication which she wished

to make to him, and, indeed, he must lose no time if he wished to see his mother alive again.

With the open letter in his hand, he hurried from his boarding house to Mr. Pomeroy's place of business.

Mr. Pomeroy was not there, and he went to the decorator's home.

Walter knew that he could ill be spared just then, and in Mr. Pomeroy's present temper it seemed to him probable that his application for leave of absence would not be granted. It had to be made, however.

"Will you be so good, sir, as to look at this?" and he placed the letter in his employer's hands.

Mr. Pomeroy glanced impatiently at it, but his expression changed as he did so.

"I am sorry for this, Loring—on your account. So you want to go?"

"If you can spare me, sir?"

"We must spare you. Never mind your work here. Be off by the first train that you can catch."

Walter thanked his employer, and was turning

away toward his lodgings, when Mr. Pomeroy called after him :

“ Stop, Loring; another word with you. Step into my library. How are you off for money? ” he asked abruptly, as the door closed behind them. “ In a case like this you cannot tell what expense may arise. You cannot have laid much by from such a salary as yours.”

Walter had to confess that he had little more than would pay his railway fare.

“ Then,” said Mr. Pomeroy, opening a drawer, “ I will lend you ten dollars. No, don’t stop to thank me. Hope for the best, my boy,” and Pomeroy hurried off to business.

We need not accompany Walter on his sad journey. His worst fears were verified—he reached home too late. After the first outbursts of his grief had subsided, he made inquiries of Mr. Stanton as to the communication which his mother had been so anxious to impart to him; but he found that the schoolmaster could tell no more than he had already said in his letter.

Mrs. Archer, who had nursed the poor widow through her illness, knew no more, though she

believed there was some secret which weighed on the patient's mind day and night. She thought, however, from signs made by the poor lady when unable to speak, that her writing desk might afford some information.

Walter examined the contents of the desk, but without success. Apparently, Mrs. Loring had passed away and left no key to the mystery.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET DRAWER.

MRS. LORING'S effects were soon disposed of, her trifling debts paid, and Walter went back to Boston. But he now seemed to have no object in life. He had worked with the hope of some day giving a comfortable home to his mother, and now there was nothing left to toil for.

This depression was the natural effect of his grief; in due time it passed away, and though the old interest in life was gone, another came to succeed it. Now that he had no one to work for or care for but himself, why should he not fulfill his early aspirations and be a sculptor?

But, penniless as he was, Mr. Pomeroy's office would for a long time to come be necessary to enable him to live, and so he toiled on day after day, saving his scant wages and studying at night.

During this time Walter made a warm friend in Rufus Foxglove, a rising young sculptor who

had done some creditable work on a number of churches. Foxglove put the boy in the way of practical lessons in this art.

From home Walter had brought his mother's writing desk. This stood by the mantel shelf in his room at the boarding house.

Bang! crash! It was bedtime one night when part of the shelf came down, knocking down the desk and breaking open one end.

As he examined the damage, Walter discovered that a secret drawer, before unknown to him, had been disclosed by the fracture. It contained a paper in his mother's hand. Regardless of everything else he hurried to a gas-burner to read it.

It appeared that, fearing she should not live to see her son again, Mrs. Loring had begun to write down those matters which had so troubled her mind. Strength had not served her to finish her task, but what she had set down amounted in substance to this:

That throughout her life at Billbury she had borne a false name and occupied a false position. She had been no widow; but that she had practiced this innocent deception for the sake of her

son—it was better that he should not be known to have a father, than one whose name must be a disgrace to him. Yet for her own part, said the poor lady, she had never turned her back upon her husband. She had done all for him that circumstances permitted her to do; and that she now left to Walter, as a sacred trust, the duty of being a true son and a comforter to his unhappy father.

She reminded Walter of the agitation she had shown when he had come in contact with Mr. Romaine. “Had you known,” she said, “how nearly that man was connected with your father’s history, you would have understood my feelings.

Up to this point the characters, formed under extreme weakness, were often only to be made out with difficulty, even by Walter’s loving eyes, but they now became altogether unreadable, and a few lines farther came to an abrupt end. It was a most sad and disappointing document. Walter rose with it in his hand, and in a distracted state of mind began to pace the room.

In the midst of his trouble Rufus Foxglove came in to talk matters over concerning some

work Walter was to undertake. He saw something was wrong at once.

"What is it, Walter?" he asked earnestly. "Remember, I am your friend."

They sat down by the stove and Walter told his story. "And now," he asked, "what do you advise me to do?"

"To me your duty seems plain—you have to carry out your mother's wishes with regard to your father."

"But, you see, she breaks off without telling me anything about him, or how to find him."

"Then you have to find him for yourself. You have a clew in this Mr. Romaine. Go to him."

"You are right, old fellow. I will hunt up his address to-morrow."

And the two friends parted for the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

FOXGLOVE advised the next day that Walter proceed slowly.

“You don’t want to make a mess of it,” he said. “I’ll go with you down to where Archibald Romaine has his office, and we’ll make a few inquiries in the neighborhood.”

They had to go in the evening, after Walter had finished his day’s work.

The office in question was, they found, one in a block of buildings wholly devoted to office uses, and at that hour locked up. Nothing was to be learned there, but on the opposite side of the street and somewhat lower was a shop which appeared to combine a law-stationery business with ordinary stationery. Foxglove suggested that this might not be a bad place at which to make inquiries.

Upon the excuse of making some trifling pur-

chase they went in. The shopkeeper proved to be a chatty man. From Walter's description of the Mr. Romaine he at once recognized his neighbor of over the way, of whom he spoke as a well-known business man.

"Has Mr. Romaine ever had a partner named Barker?" Walter asked, almost at haphazard.

"Not just that," said the man. "There had been a Mr. Barker with him, but he was no more than a managing clerk."

There had, he believed, once been a partner, but that was before his day. There was some queer story about him. The name he could not remember—something, he thought, like Busby or Buncomb.

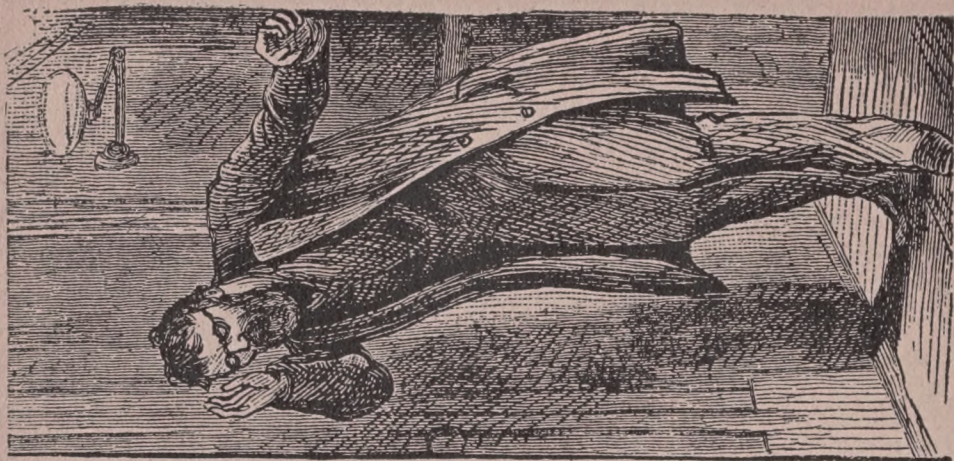
They turned to leave the shop. As they did so Walter caught sight of a face peering in through the window at himself. It was gone in an instant.

"See!" whispered Walter.

"What?"

"There was Barker looking at me!"

They hurried out of the shop, but before they could catch sight of the man again he was gone.



The next day Walter got permission to go off and called on Mr. Romaine. Although he did not know it, Barker, in disguise, followed him to the very door of the contractor's office to spy upon him.

Mr. Romaine smiled faintly on seeing the boy, but he neither looked well nor happy. That difficulty of breathing which Walter had remarked in the Billbury woods was more evident than ever. He was, however, very cordial. He had wondered, he said, that Walter should not have called on him sooner, and he professed himself glad to see, from the young man's improved appearance, that the world used him better now than when they had met at the queer old town in the mountains.

Walter was well pleased to be able to speak of Mr. Pomeroy and of his bright artistic prospects.

"When I thought I might help you to a start in life," said the contractor, "my idea was to set you going as a clerk in my business. I could have done nothing for you in decorating, and I am glad, since that is your line, that you have found a more useful patron than I could have

been. Yet remember, my young friend, that I consider myself in your debt, and when there is anything in my way which can be done to serve you don't fail to remind me of it."

Walter thanked him. "The fact is, sir," he said, "that I came to ask a favor of you to-day."

"Anything connected with my business?" inquired Mr. Romaine, smiling.

"Perhaps it is, sir. I have just learned that I have a father still living. It is necessary that I should find him. I hoped you might be able to put me into the way of doing so."

"A father living, eh? Well, you shall have the benefit of my experience. Give me particulars of the story."

Walter proceeded to do so, but had scarcely reached the pith of his narrative when he observed the contractor lean back in his chair gasping for breath. His face had become absolutely purple; in great alarm our friend was rushing to the door to summon the clerks, when Mr. Romaine, who, although almost speechless, was not unconscious, forbade him to do so by a motion of his hand. He indicated that he was to throw up the win-

dow. Walter obeyed, and in a few minutes Mr. Romaine was again able to speak.

"I am subject to these attacks," he said. "They are nothing. Any little excitement brings them on, and what I heard from you naturally affected me. When I saw you in the country I was struck with your resemblance to a person who had been well known to me. That person was my former partner, Henry Blarcomb. I can now no longer doubt that you are his son."

"I had already suspected as much," said Walter.

"And you will also be aware that his story is a sad one?"

"Yes, everything has pointed to it; but I know no particulars whatever about him."

"Then I am sorry that I should have to give them to you; but the fact is that our connection ceased when he was convicted of forgery."

"Forgery!"

The room seemed to swim before Walter's eyes.

In whatever speculations about his father Walter might have engaged during these last days,

the idea of his being a convicted and disgraced criminal had never occurred to him. He was greatly agitated. Presently he asked:

“And what became of him?”

“His sentence,” said Mr. Romaine, “was a heavy one. It was twenty years.” Walter felt stunned—overwhelmed. He rose to go. Mr. Romaine did not seek to detain him, though his manner was very kind.

“My dear young friend,” he said, “I am truly sorry to have caused you so much pain, but as you came to me for this information it was not for me to withhold it. Yes, you are quite right, you had better go; we are neither of us in a fit state to talk further of these matters. Always think of me as a friend. You will of course continue to bear the name you have hitherto borne. Good-day.”

He was let out by the contractor through a private door. It was at some distance from the ordinary office door by which he had entered, and was near the bottom of a dark and gloomy common staircase. Walter, as he came out, was like one in a dream, and he had gone some distance along the street before he became fully conscious

that, throwing a chance glance up at that common stair, he had seen a man lurking in the shadow at the first turning who had been watching him as intently as a cat might watch a mouse, and that that man was Barker.

CHAPTER IX.

BARKER'S DEMANDS.

WALTER went in his way, and Barker, who had so placed himself that he could not fail also to see him leave Mr. Romaine's office, now went to the more public doorway and inquired if the contractor was in.

"He is," said the clerk, "but he cannot be seen. He has had one of his attacks, and wishes to remain quiet for a time.

"My business will not wait, so I am afraid I must disturb him," and Barker coolly pushed open the door of the private room and entered.

The contractor sat with his hands pressed to his eyes. As he looked up on the entrance of his unbidden guest, the expression of languor on his face changed to one of loathing, not perhaps unmixed with fear.

"You have had a visitor," said Barker

abruptly. "The young fellow who calls himself 'Loring'—Blarcomb's son?"

"Young Loring has been here. How do you know that he is Blarcomb's son?"

Barker turned the key in the outer door and looked to see that the inner one, covered with baize, was closely shut; then he said: "From the time I first saw that boy down at Billbury I suspected who he was. I have kept my eye upon him. He has been making inquiries about you and about me in this neighborhood, and now he has been closeted with you. What has he been here for?"

The insolence of the last words, and the manner in which they were uttered, appeared to irritate the contractor. "Remember where you are, Mr. Barker," he said, drawing himself up.

Barker laughed. "Ride the high horse, Romaine, if you like. Of course, you can refuse to answer me—you can order me to be turned out of your office, if you like. But you will do neither."

"Barker," said Mr. Romaine, in a lower and more conciliatory tone, "I am out of sorts, and if

I must talk with you, sit down and let us talk quietly. Young Blarcomb has been brought up in ignorance of his father's story, but it seems that latterly he has got some hints about it. He came to me wishing to learn more."

"And of course you told him everything?"

Mr. Romaine winced. "I told him what the crime was, and what the punishment. That was all; and, poor fellow! it seemed more than he could bear."

"Shall you let him see you again, and fish out more?"

"I have asked him to visit me again. He is a fine lad. He interests me. I should wish to help him."

"As a reward for his services in Billbury woods?" sneered Barker.

"Be that as it may. To be kind to him would be some amends for the wrong done to his father."

"It is unnecessary to talk of wrongs," said Barker. "Without those wrongs somebody would have been ruined, and somebody would be ruined now if those wrongs were put right. As

to this young fellow, the less sentiment you indulge in about him the better. Hark you! Romaine! he will have to be crushed. I have kept my eye on him, and there is mischief in him. He is a clever lad, and has the stuff in him to make his mark in the world. Sooner or later he will set himself to sift this business of his father's to the bottom. He will work on your soft nature, and revelations will be made which will mean ruin."

Mr. Romaine gave a kind of shudder.

"And so," Barker went on, "you must throw him overboard. I have a rough idea as to what should be done with him, and you will have to lend a hand in crushing him."

"I don't know what you mean by 'crushing,'" said the contractor slowly, "and I have no wish to know; but this I tell you, Barker, that I will be no party to anything that may harm the lad. You are always threatening me with ruin; but standing as I do with one foot in the grave, I will have nothing to do with any more of your devilish plots. I like the lad; I have said I will be his friend, and I mean it."

For some moments Barker looked at his companion in silence. He seemed to be debating whether, as Mr. Romaine had taken up so determined a position, it would not be better to defer further discussion. He must have decided that it would, for presently he said:

“ Well, safety means much more to you than to me, and when you have cooled down, you will be glad to consider what I have said. Sorry as you will be to lose me, I am going; but if you happen to have the little check drawn which we talked about the other day, I think I will take it with me.”

The contractor opened a drawer and produced the slip of paper. Barker took it, put it in his pocket, buttoned up his coat, and departed.

Left to himself, Archibald Romaine groaned aloud.

“ Where will this end? First, the father and now the son? What must I do to hide the evidence of that crime? ”

CHAPTER X.

A SECOND VISIT.

NEVER was a fellow more miserable than was Walter Loring when he rejoined his friend Rufus Foxglove. Yet he was glad to see the young sculptor. The miserable knowledge which had come to him would be more tolerable if he could talk it over with his friend, and, whatever the rest of the world might do, he felt sure that Rufus would not shrink from him as the son of a disgraced felon.

And Foxglove did not. "Even if your father did as you are told, Walter," he said, "the fault is none of yours; it can't lessen our friendship, old fellow; but we are not sure yet that he really did do it. You know nothing of the circumstances as yet, and many innocent men have been convicted ere now."

"That is true," responded Walter, glad to be cheered by any little ray of hope.

"Your mother must have known all about it,"

Rufus went on, "and it is quite clear that she did not believe in his guilt; and you have a right to look at the brightest side at present. You have not heard his own version of the story yet, you know, and that may show matters in quite a different light. Did you learn where he was imprisoned?"

"No. I was too much upset to ask for any particulars."

"Of course you must get to know. Mr. Romaine might or might not have the information; but he must know where to get it."

"Yes, that I must find out. Of course I must see my father. I understand my mother's mysterious absence from home now—she went to visit him. I suppose I could get the same privilege. How do people get to see convicts?"

"All that a man like Mr. Romaine would know, or find out for you. He does not seem to be a bad sort of fellow. Were I you, I should go to him again, and have a steady talk about the matter. I should wait a few days before doing so, just to get familiar with the idea, and to think out what ought to be said."

Walter agreed that this would be the thing to do. Half his load of trouble seemed to have been removed by Foxglove's sympathy, and he went to his work with a comparatively cheery heart.

Yet, the second visit to Mr. Romaine's office, from which Walter was to have learned so much, did not prove a success. He was at once admitted to the private room, and found the lawyer quite as friendly in manner as before, but no opening was given for introducing the subject of which he came to speak. The interview was a short one, and while it lasted, Mr. Romaine kept the conversation to other topics. He then gave his visitor to understand that customers were waiting, and time precious; and, having made him promise to dine with him a few evenings later, dismissed him in the most pleasant way imaginable.

CHAPTER XI.

A DIRECT QUESTION.

“HE doesn’t want to talk, but I’ll make him.”

Thus soliloquized Walter, and he meant what he said.

Mr. Romaine lived in one of the smaller squares of the Dorchester district. His was not a large house, but as a mere bachelor establishment it was well appointed. Walter found himself the only guest, but the little, two-handed dinner was admirable and excellently served. Mr. Romaine fully understood the pleasures of the table.

He was an agreeable host. He had seen much of the world, and could talk well about most things. As being the subject most interesting to his guest, he talked much about art. Technically he, of course, knew nothing of it, but he had met with famous artists and sculptors. He knew, too, how to lead the young man into talking freely of his own artistic views and aspirations, in

which he appeared to be, and perhaps really was, interested. He insisted that Walter should dine with him again at an early date and bring his models with him.

Thus to our hero, to whom such experiences were new, the evening was a delightful one; and it was not till he was walking homeward that he remembered that he had not learned one word about his father.

However, he would be more firm to his purpose next time. The appointed evening came, and, with his models under his arm, he again went to Mr. Romaine's house. This evening he experienced the delight which comes to the young worker but once in his life—that of the first sale of his works. Mr. Romaine criticised his models intelligently, and the praise he gave carried with it no impression of being mere idle flattery. He ended by buying a statuette of Liberty and by hinting at the probability of a commission for something larger by and by.

On such an evening it was no wonder that the disagreeable topic was again unmentioned.

These little dinners at intervals of two or three

weeks were becoming an institution. After each of the above occasions, Foxglove had asked, "Any more about your father, Walter?" and Walter had to answer in the negative. He could not say that Mr. Romaine had purposely kept aloof from the subject, and yet he was not without a feeling that such might have been the case. He did not know, as we do, the motives which the lawyer had for wishing to avoid it.

"Mr. Romaine wishes to be your friend," said Rufus, "and he likes having you with him, that is plain; and I don't see why he should not be willing to tell you all that he can. I should make a point of putting it straight to him were I you, old fellow."

Walter did so the next time he went—that is, so far as to ask whether the contractor could tell him where his father was confined.

It was quite evident that the question was not pleasing to Mr. Romaine. He did not know, but probably he could procure the information; and having said that, he promptly turned the talk into another channel.

Walter mentioned this to Rufus afterward, and

the two young men agreed that a desire to spare the son's feelings must be Mr. Romaine's motive for wishing to avoid speaking of the convict father.

Shortly afterward, however, Mr. Romaine reverted to Walter's question of his own accord.

"I have information with regard to your father," he said. "I caused application to be made in the proper quarter, and have a reply."

"You can tell me where he is, then?" cried Walter eagerly.

"Scarcely. I am not sure whether you will think my information satisfactory or the reverse."

Walter looked perplexed.

"I find that Henry Blarcomb was released several months since for good behavior. It is believed that he must either have left the country under an assumed name, or be dead—most probably the latter. In either case, the chances that he will ever be heard of again are very small."

"This may be relied upon, sir?"

"Absolutely—it is official."

"Then any inquiries I can make will be of no good?"

“They would be quite useless. In the unlikely event of anything more being heard of him, I should be informed by the police authorities, and should let yon know. My advice to you is, not to waste your energies on a wild-goose chase, but to apply them steadily to your own pursuit of art, in which, I think, I may say without flattery, that you have a fair future before you.”

With this, Mr. Romaine closed the subject. But Walter was not satisfied, nor was Foxglove satisfied when the conversation was reported to him. Neither of them doubted the statement, but they both held that Walter ought to know the full particulars of the crime charged upon his father. Mr. Romaine was the only person of his acquaintance who could supply these particulars; and the two young men agreed that, notwithstanding his evident reluctance, Walter would be justified in pressing him for them. Circumstances of a startling nature were, however, about to happen which rendered any such proceeding on his part unnecessary.

Through these weeks Mr. Romaine had, so far as Walter knew, had no return of his alarm-

ing attacks. On each of the evenings mentioned he had appeared in excellent health and spirits. But when our friend next knocked at his door, the servant who opened it showed a grave face. His master had, he said, been brought home ill from the office the previous afternoon. He had had a bad night and day. The doctor said he should pull him through this time, but Mr. Romaine was less hopeful about himself.

“He gave orders, sir,” said the man, “that you were to be shown to his room at once when you came.”

The contractor was propped up with pillows, and breathed with difficulty. He motioned to Walter to close the door, and come to his bedside.

“I shall not get over this,” he said, “and I wished to see you. There are matters relating to that affair of poor Blarcomb which I must tell before I die, and you, his son, ought to know them. I have taken a liking to you, and have wished to be your friend—I have been your friend, for I have stood between you and an enemy who both hates and fears you, and who

sticks at nothing. Barker is your enemy, and I warn you to beware of that man."

It was only in broken sentences and with long pauses that the sick man was able to proceed thus far, but this seemed to exhaust him. He made attempts to proceed. It was evidently about the crime attributed to Henry Blarcomb that he wished to make some statement. But he broke down altogether.

Walter, who thought him dying, called for help. The doctor was summoned; and it was long before the patient again became conscious. Any further talk with him that night was out of the question, and Walter left the house.

When he called to make inquiries next day, Mr. Romaine was better; but he was not allowed to see him. The following day there was decided improvement. Walter saw him, and found him confident of recovery. He spoke of what had passed between them, but said that he had now changed his mind.

"You shall know all that I wish to tell in due time," he said, "but not now. Your father is dead, and a few weeks, or, at the most, months,

can make no difference to anyone. My time will be short, but whilst I live you must wait. You will desire to do justice to your father's memory, and such means as I can put in your power you shall have—but not till I am gone. Will this content you?"

Walter could only answer that it would.

Mr. Romaine was soon to all appearance as well as ever again, and again went to his office; but he did not forget his engagement. He one day called Walter's attention to a row of tin boxes, ranged on a shelf, and bearing the names of customers. A new one had been added, on which was painted "Mr. Walter Loring."

"That," he said, giving Walter a key, "contains the paper which I have written for your information, with some other documents relating to the same subject. I have left instructions that the box be handed over to you after my death."

CHAPTER XII.

BEN'S QUEER STORY.

"HULLO, Walter Loring!"

"Why, Ben, is that you?" cried out Walter, and he seized his old friend's hand. "How are things in Billbury?"

"I'm not in Billbury any more," returned Ben Archer. "I'm in Boston."

"To stay?"

Ben nodded.

"It's this way," he explained. "Father is dead and mother and I came here to make our living."

"And what are you doing?"

"Keeping a little restaurant near the Jackson docks. We are doing pretty well, too," Ben continued. "But I must get along. I was sent to buy some potatoes."

"Come and see me," said Walter, and Ben

promised, and came several times and was introduced to Foxglove.

One night he called with a particularly sober face. Foxglove was also at Walter's apartment.

"Since I was here last," said Ben, "a queer thing happened at our place. Folks say 'good bread hurts no man,' but it nearly killed a customer in our restaurant."

Walter and Rufus expressed their curiosity and begged Ben to proceed. He went on:

"I was in the back room when a tallish, thin man came into the shop. His clothes were very poor, but you could see that he had been a gentleman in his time. A hungrier-looking man I never set eyes on."

"Poor wretch!" ejaculated Foxglove.

"He had a quarter tight in his hand; down he lays it on the counter and asks for some rolls. My mother picks it up before she reaches the bread—she's sharp in business, she is—and rings it. 'Thud' it goes. 'You don't come these tricks here,' she says, and calls out to me; 'Fetch the policeman, Ben!'"

"This grows exciting," cried Walter.
"What next?"

"I was peering out at the poor gentleman—he looked it, for all his rags—and I saw what a hopeless look came into his face when he heard the money was bad. I felt sorry for him, that I did, but I had to look like a boss for mother's sake; so I comes out and says: 'Now, will you go to the station quiet, or won't you?' "

"And then?" queried Rufus.

"Why, then, sir, what should the poor chap do but drop on his knees and beg we'd do anything with him but hand him over to the police. He vowed he didn't know the quarter was bad. He was, as we might see, starving, and as he came along the parks he found the money. He had brought it into the first shop he came to."

"And what did you do?"

"I? I looked at mother to see what I was to do, but instead of looking at me she takes a knife and cuts a big slice from one of the loaves of bread on the counter. Clever as she is, she is every bit as foolish as I am at times. Well, she gives it to the poor chap, and he begins eating it

as if he hadn't touched bread for a week past. But before he'd half finished it, down he dropped like anyone in a fit. Good bread went near killing him, and a queer thing it was."

"And what was the end of it?" inquired Rufus.

"I thought perhaps I had better go to the police, but mother, she says: 'You stupid, don't you see he's dying for want? And while the police are making a fuss over him he'll be dead. You carry him into the kitchen.' And I took him in, and she gets some broth and gives it to him, little by little, with a spoon, and by and by he comes round."

"Good!" cried Foxglove, and Walter clapped his hands.

"And so," Ben continued, "he got better. We had our doctor to him, and he said he ought not to be moved. By good luck we had a spare room, and mother she says: 'We won't have any risk by taking him to the station; we'll put him in the room.' So there he is."

"But I want to hear—did he turn out to be a gentleman after all?" asked Walter.

“Well, sir, he let me know (confidential like, as I may tell you) that he'd been a contractor and had been sent to prison for something he hadn't done—forgery, I think he said—and that he'd been years in prison before they let him out, and that he was now going about in fear of his enemies.”

Walter was much affected. He thought of his father. Could this man Ben had described be his parent?

“I must see that old gentleman at once!” cried Walter in excitement.

Much perplexed as to what the meaning of this might be, Ben led the way, but he soon found himself unable to keep pace with the eagerness of his companion.

They reached the house, and Walter was shown by Mrs. Archer into the invalid's room. He was now dressed in his poor, worn clothes and was seated by the fire. True, he had, as Ben said, some indications of the bearing of a gentleman, but such a haggard, worn, broken-down wretch did he appear that Walter's first thought was a

hope that he might not prove to be the father whom he had come so eagerly to seek.

As Walter entered, the poor man started and cast a frightened glance toward him, which Mrs. Archer understood.

"You need not be afraid to talk to this young gentleman," she said; "our Ben has known him all his life, and he has come to speak with you."

"I am sure I need not distrust any old friend of your son's, Mrs. Archer. Pray be seated, sir."

Walter sat down in the only unoccupied chair in the room.

"You wish to learn something from me?" said the poor gentleman. "I shall gladly give you any information that I can, though I question whether anything that I can now say can interest any person living. After the assurance I have had I am convinced that you do not wish to extract anything from me that can be used to my prejudice."

"Far from it," replied Walter. "I came with the hope that I might render you a service—that

I might possibly be the means of placing you in communication with your family."

"Then," said the gentleman, with a sad smile, "I fear you were under a mistake when you undertook your kind mission. I have no relations left who would feel an interest in me. If I have a son living, he is probably not aware of my existence. One person only remained faithful to me through my troubles, and she I now know is dead. That was my wife."

At each word Walter's suspicion that this man must indeed be his father grew stronger and stronger. "I imagine," he said, "that I must have known something of this lady. She did not, I think, bear her real name?"

"No; she was known as Mrs. Loring—Mary Loring!"

"And her real name," cried Walter, springing up, "was Blarcomb—Mary Blarcomb—and your name is Blarcomb—and so is mine—Walter Blarcomb. Do you not recognize me? I am her son, and yours!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WALTER'S FATHER.

YES, Walter had found his father, and now that he was sure of it he was not ashamed of him; he was only ashamed of the unworthy wish that had so lately passed through his mind. At first Mr. Blarcomb, who was still very weak, seemed bewildered by the discovery, but this passed, and father and son had a long talk together.

Mr. Blarcomb told the story of his wrongs. He most solemnly asserted his innocence of the forgery and declared that he had been the victim of a base conspiracy between his partner, Archibald Romaine, and Ralph Barker.

It was with the deepest indignation that Walter listened to these statements. He felt convinced of their truth, for they explained what before had been incomprehensible—the hatred of Barker for himself and the strange behavior of Mr. Romaine.

It was rather against the latter that his anger was excited. The idea that he should have eaten and drunk and received favors from a man who had brought about the ruin of his father in such a manner was loathsome to him.

He went home longing to tell him what he thought of his conduct and to repudiate his friendship.

It was two days later that Walter started out to call on Archibald Romaine.

When he reached the place he found the door, contrary to all precedent, standing open. Within, the clerks were not in their places. A sound of confused voices issued from Mr. Romaine's private room, the door of which also was not closed. What could it mean?

After a moment's pause Walter crossed to the door of the sanctum and looked in. Several persons were crowding about Mr. Romaine's chair—the two clerks and the messenger and the house-keeper and a gray-headed gentleman whom he did not recognize. At first he supposed that the gentleman himself was not there; then he became aware that a something had sunk down into a

confused heap in the leather-covered chair, and a feeling of alarm and awe came over him.

He had indeed come too late. Another visitor—one who enters at all doors, but knocks at none—had entered before him. Death was there. The ears into which his bitter words were to have been poured were closed forever against all reproach.

“Nothing can be done,” said the gray-headed gentleman—a doctor as it seemed. “He has been dead this half-hour. He was quite alone, you say?”

“Quite,” returned an assistant. “He was not strong, and when anything has happened to disturb him he has of late liked to be left alone for a time afterward.”

“Suffered under excitement, did he? and something had happened to disturb him?”

“Yes, he had a visitor; a person who was formerly his confidential clerk. We don’t know the nature of this man’s business, but Mr. Romaine has generally seemed upset after his visits.”

“I tell you this, sir,” put in Mr. Brown, the junior, in a half-whisper, “there were high words

between them—I could hear, for all the double door. He's a queer man, that Mr. Barker. No likelihood of foul play, eh, sir?"

"'Sh! 'sh!" came from the assistant, and the doctor spoke hurriedly. "No, no; certainly not. All appearances point to death from natural causes—heart probably. His own medical man ought to have warned him against excitement."

And the doctor went his way.

As Walter looked on the distorted face now stiffening in death, he knew that a great change had come over his feelings. His anger was gone. Whatever this dead man might have been to others, to him he had been kindness only. Tears rose to his eyes, and Walter would have stolen away unseen had not Mr. Brown accosted him—speaking, as the occasion demanded, in an undertone:

"It's an awful thing, Mr. Loring, and I don't wonder at your being affected. He thought much of you."

"Mr. Romaine was always good to me."

"Yes, and very particular he was about your papers—more than about any others. There,

you see, is your box—but, bless me! why it's gone!" and he pointed to a vacant place on the shelf. "It was there this morning. Surely that Barker—oh, no; here it is," and he picked up the box from the floor, where it lay, bruised and indented, as if by a fall.

At another time the circumstance might have excited Walter's curiosity, but now, standing as he did in the presence of death, he scarcely noticed it. Preparations for removing the body were being made, and quietly and reverently he withdrew from the place.

CHAPTER XIV.

HARD TIMES.

MR. BLARCOMB recovered but slowly, and with the additional expense incurred, Walter found it often hard to make both ends meet.

"You don't look cheerful," remarked Rufus one day. "Don't let the stain on your family name cast you down. It will all come out right in the end."

"I was worrying over my increased expenses."

"Oh, well, do the best you can, and remember if times are bad we'll share and share alike, you know."

"You are a good fellow, Rufus, and mean what you say; but I must see what I can do for myself."

Walter did so. He opened his case to Mr. Pomeroy. He had grown to have a thorough belief in that very practical man. Mr. Pomeroy

said if Walter liked to come in earlier to the office he could do so at double his present salary; trade was brisk and there would be work both for him and for the lad. So the arrangement was made.

And now our friend stood face to face with the world and knew that he had a hard battle to fight. It was a cruel change. But a little while since all his prospects had appeared so bright and his upward way so easy. Now, as well as maintaining himself, the charge of his sick father would rest upon him.

Poverty and hard work were all that he could see before him; nevertheless he hoped and resolved by God's blessing to fight it through and make a place and a name in the world yet.

The social pleasures—the little dinners at Mr. Romaine's—were now things of the past. His relaxations were his duty visits to his father's room. Nor were these without pleasure. As the unfortunate man slowly gained strength he showed, though at intervals only, something of what he had been in his happier days. His must have been an intellectual and even a brilliant

mind; the honorable instincts of a gentleman had obviously been strong in him—the courteous manners of one he had always retained.

The more Walter saw of his father the more firmly did he believe him to be incapable of such a crime as that with which he had been charged, and the more earnestly did he long for the means of clearing his character before the world.

Mr. Romaine had dropped words to the effect that the papers which he bequeathed to Walter would enable him to do this. But the tin box had not yet been handed over. The usual formalities had to be observed before anything could be removed from the dead man's office. Walter had called more than once, when he had happened to be in that direction, to make inquiries, but with no results beyond the exchange of a few friendly words with Mr. Brown.

A day, however, came when the office assistant held out hopes that in about a week he should have the necessary authority. As Walter was going out and nodding a passing good-day to Brown, that young gentleman said, almost in a whisper: "I want a word with you, Mr. Loring—

private, you know. Could you wait for me outside for five minutes?"

Walter paced slowly up the pavement, and was presently joined by the junior.

"You know that Mr. Barker?" the latter began, in a tone in which there was a touch of mystery.

Our friend assented.

"Do you know why he is so anxious to get at your deed box?"

Walter only answered by another question: "Does he want to get at it?"

"He does," in a tone of deeper mystery. "He he has been trying to tamper with me—throwing out hints that it might be worth my while to help him to it. He is a deep hand, is Barker; but he has made a mistake in his man this time."

"You have told him so?"

"Not a bit of it. You have always been pleasant to me, Mr. Loring, and I like you. So, thinking you might wish to get an insight into his moves, I left the business open. He is to see me again."

"It was awfully good of you to think of me.

It might be a very great advantage to me to learn what he is after. If you can extract anything from him without committing yourself, I shall be vastly obliged to you."

Brown promised to do his best and to report progress as soon as he had anything to tell; and they parted.

Here was matter for further speculation. If the papers in the tin box were what Walter supposed them to be, Barker's desire to secure them was quite comprehensible. They must contain matter which would criminate him. But it was not easy to understand how he had gained his knowledge about them. On that point Walter found himself completely in the dark.

CHAPTER XV.

ABOUT THE TIN BOX.

A WEEK later Walter one morning received by the same post a formal note from the assistant, informing him that he could now have his deed box at any time within office hours, and a less formal one from Mr. Brown. This letter contained a request that he would look in at the writer's lodgings in the evening, as he had matter to communicate which could only be told by word of mouth.

Walter left work at an early hour.

It was November. Since morning a fog had hung over the town, which had grown denser as the short day drew toward its close. The pavements were damp and greasy under foot, the air was cold and raw; the prospect of a long walk was far from a cheerful one, but there were no spare nickels now to pay for rides.

When Walter set out it was, by courtesy, still

daylight, though the gas had long been burning in shops and offices. Soon, however, the street lamps were set alight, and evening fairly inaugurated. But no light could penetrate far into the dense fog. Everything was dim and uncertain, and the lively imagination of our friend pictured with what ease an enemy—Ralph Barker, perhaps—might have glided along, almost by his side, unrecognized. How could he tell that any one of the figures that passed near him, muffled in vapor, was not that man?

Walter had timed his visit well. The office, when he reached it, was about to be closed. Entering what was once Mr. Romaine's private room, for probably the last time, he gave a formal receipt to the assistant for the deed box, and took it under his arm. As he returned through the outer office he found Mr. Brown just putting on his coat. The two young men walked out together.

The streets looked doubly dismal after the comparative brightness of the office; Walter was really glad that he had a companion, and Brown at once began to talk.

"I can't make much out of that fellow Barker, except that he sets a pretty high value on whatever may be in your box."

"Indeed! I am anxious to hear what passed between you."

"As we have time," said Brown, "I can tell you all about it, from the beginning. He dropped in soon after the governor's death, and began talking to me in a friendly way, as he had never done before, and somehow he contrived to mention that box of yours, and to ask in a careless way when it would be given to you. I, having no suspicions, said that as things were going, it could not be for several weeks. He dropped the subject. My belief is that, with plenty of time before him, he thought that he should be sure to find a chance of collaring it on the sly."

"You don't give our friend credit for the most honorable designs!"

"Honorable! I know what his designs are from his own mouth. But our manager distrusted him, and never gave him a chance, and then Mr. Barker tried to work me."

"Yes, you told me; but have you seen him again?"

"Two nights ago, when I came out of the office, he was waiting for me—as he might be now."

Mr. Brown glanced round, which caused Walter to do the same, and with some return of his former nervous dread.

"And what should he do but offer me fifty dollars if I would smuggle your box out to him! I let him know that the money would be useful—which was true enough—but that there was risk. He said that if I managed things well there need be no risk, for I might contrive to let the messenger or someone else get the blame, and that I could choose my own time. I answered—rather unguardedly, I fear—that there would be very little time left now; and then, you know how quick he is, he was down on me in an instant.

Mr. Brown stopped abruptly. A moment later he whispered, "Step on faster. Someone is walking behind and keeping pace with us as if he were listening."

Brown spoke without turning his head, but

Walter looked round. It was a quiet street, one person only was near enough to be seen in the fog, and he had stopped at a door.

"A false alarm," he said. "How was Barker down on you?"

"He gripped me by the arm and hissed out: 'Has Meakin received authority to give up those things?' I owned that he had; and then came: 'When will this boy have the box?'"

"Did you tell him that, too?"

"Oh, yes!" chuckled Mr. Brown, "I told him what I chose to tell him. Feeling sure that you would get it by to-morrow morning at the latest, I gave him to understand that it would not be delivered to you till the day after to-morrow. I had no compunction about bamboozling him."

"Excellent! He had his match in you."

"I hope so. I also hinted to him that to-morrow I would see what could be done, and that if he would meet me to-morrow evening, and bring the money, he might possibly learn something to his advantage. He will learn," said Mr. Brown, with another chuckle, "that he has

been made a fool of, and that the box is safely in the keeping of its proper owner."

"Bravo!" cried Walter, "I should like to see Barker when——"

"'Sh! 'sh!" whispered Brown, "speak lower—I hear those footsteps again."

CHAPTER XVI.

A CHASE IN THE FOG.

WALTER and his companion stopped and looked round and listened, but there was nothing to give any show of probability to the supposition that they were followed. They went on, and presently turned into a wider street.

Before them was a large saloon, the lights of which made a sort of hazy brilliance in a little space of fog in front of it, and here some street musicians were performing. On such an evening the idlers in the streets were comparatively few, yet a little crowd had collected, through which our friend and the clerk had to elbow their way.

Walter wore a cape coat beneath which the tin box was carried snugly and out of sight; yet, as they pushed through the listeners, some person, putting his hand as it seemed under the cape, struck the box with his knuckles hard enough to

make it give out a ringing sound; still the incident was so trifling that Walter scarcely noticed it.

No sooner, however, were they clear of the throng than Walter felt Brown clutch his arm nervously, and looking at him he saw alarm in his face. "What is it?" he asked.

"Step on," whispered Brown, "as fast as you can. My rooms are just round the corner. Did you see who it was that touched your box?"

"Some drunken idiot, I take it."

"No; I saw his face—it was Barker. That man must have been watching the office, and he has followed us. He is sure now that you have the box, and I don't believe he would stick at murder to get it. But we have distanced him. Now let us slip round the corner—in the fog he will not see where we are gone—and here we are at my place."

Mr. Brown produced his latchkey; the street door closed behind them; and outside it were left those two disagreeable companions, the fog and Ralph Barker.

A bright fire was burning in Mr. Brown's

grate, and its warmth was a pleasant thing after the dank clinging vapor without. As the two young men stood chatting before it, they congratulated themselves on having given the slip to their pursuer.

Ten minutes later, thinking the coast clear, the door was opened, and the two looked out together. The fog seemed to be growing denser rather than otherwise; but no Barker was to be seen, and they concluded that their ruse had been successful. But Walter, as he plunged anew into the fog, was deluding himself with a vain hope. While he had basked in the pleasant glow of the fire, a figure buttoned to the chin, but shivering in the raw vapor, had been cowering in a dark doorway opposite, watching every change of shadow that fell on Mr. Brown's window blind.

Barker found himself forced to play a bold game. He was no longer a man in desperate circumstances, as he had been at the time of the Billbury woods affair. The business which he had established by blackmail levied on his former master had proved a success. He could not afford to be exposed. In that box were documents which

might ruin him, and he was resolved to have it at all hazards. Too wary to trust to Brown's statements, he had kept an eye on the office, and seeing the two young men come out together, suspected that he had been tricked. He had not been deceived by their slipping into this place of refuge; he expected it, for he had taken care to ascertain where his intended tool lived. So, no sooner did Walter again start homeward than Barker again silently glided after him.

His plan was to follow unseen till a favorable moment should arrive; but so thick had the atmosphere now become that to keep his man in sight it was necessary to follow closely. Thus it was that before three blocks were passed, Walter's ear had more than once noticed the regular fall of footsteps behind, which seemed to echo his own, and glancing around, had caught sight of the closely buttoned figure looming through the fog. At such times an uncomfortable question would pass through his mind as to whether it was possible that his enemy could again be after him.

Presently the silence of the street made him feel certain that those soft footfalls echoing his own

could be no delusion and no accident. They were nearer than ever; and now through the thick mist he could make out that the tightly buttoned figure, which he felt sure was Barker, was almost close upon him.

He was no longer the timid boy who had been struck down in the woods, but ever since that time this man had inspired him with a kind of instinctive dread. He believed him to be equal to any crime, and he expected that he was armed. Any parley with him was to be avoided if possible. He quickened his pace to his very fastest walk.

But his pursuer was not easily to be outdistanced. His own hurried footfalls drowned those behind him, but the first glance round showed him the figure in the fog scarcely farther away than before.

At the next look it was still nearer. Barker was an active man, and he was evidently making a spurt—this, indeed, was the place of all others for him to close with his prey.

What was to be done? Should he turn and confront his enemy? He thought of Barker's

revolver—the risk was too great. Should he throw the box over the high iron palings into the adjacent gardens? or, should he lay aside his pride and run for it?

He took the last course—he ran.

“Stop!”

Walter made no reply. He ran faster than ever. With a yell Barker came after him. It was nip and tuck for a minute and then the boy found himself tight in his enemy's grasp.

“So I've got you at last!” hissed Barker.

“Let me go!” gasped Walter. “You have no right——”

“Shut up! The box—hand it over instantly.”

“I will not!”

“I say you shall.”

A struggle commenced, and the man was getting the better of it when suddenly he slipped on the wet pavement and went down with Walter on top of him.

“Oh, my ankle!” roared Barker. “It is twisted out of shape.”

Walter made no reply. Wrenching himself free, he ran his fastest, never staying to look back,

and never halting until he reached his boarding place.

It was several minutes before Barker got up and hobbled after the boy. His face fairly glowed with rage.

"I'll fix him yet!" he growled under his breath.

When Walter had turned into the lonely street Barker had congratulated himself on being sure of success. He knew how deserted it would be on such a night, and believing that Walter was not aware that he was followed, he hoped by pouncing suddenly upon him to induce him to surrender the all-important box without resistance. When, however, his prey slipped almost from under his very grasp, he was not a little chagrined.

But he was not yet beaten. He knew all about Walter's boarding house—a rather lonely resort on a side street. Walter would be alone; by following him there would still be a reasonable hope of success.

So Mr. Barker trudged on till he entered that quiet scrap of back street upon which the house

opened. Except by the fog, which was there in force, it seemed wholly deserted.

He knocked on the door. Had the young man taken his treasure elsewhere? for there was no response. He knocked a second time, and more loudly. A pause followed, and then there were steps within, and the door was opened.

"Is Mr. Loring in?" asked the tightly buttoned visitor, so edging himself into the opening as to render it impossible to close the door on him. "Ah, I see it is Mr. Loring himself. You do not remember me. My name is Barker."

He forced Walter back and entered the house.



"YOU ARE HERE ALONE," SAID BARKER. P. 195.

CHAPTER XVII.

A THRILLING MOMENT—CONCLUSION.

UNFORTUNATELY Walter was alone, the other boarders and the landlady being out. He tried to force Barker back, but failed. Then he ran up to his room, but the man followed.

“Ah!” he cried as he glanced at the center of the room.

Beneath the gas burner stood a table, round which were two or three chairs, and on the table, as if hastily set down by Walter when he had entered, was the deed box. On this Mr. Barker’s eyes rested greedily.

“You are here alone?” he asked. “This is a queer place of yours. There are people with whom I should not care to be alone here. I should call it a creepy sort of place.”

“It is quiet,” said Walter, “and suits my study. Mr. Barker, let me know what your business is,” he went on as steadily as he could.

"My business," he began, "is urgent, or you may be sure I should not have tramped so much Boston pavement after you on such a night as this; and unless I deceive myself, you can guess what it is—that box brings me here. You know what its contents are?"

"I have not opened it nor seen them."

"Then I may tell you that it is stuffed with a pack of libelous documents, concocted for no other purpose than to defame my character. Their author was a man who ought to have been grateful for the services I had rendered him, but who was a viper, and only hated me for them."

"Do you allude to Mr. Romaine?"

"Yes, I mean Romaine. Too great a sneak to strike at me when I could possibly strike again, he forms a scheme to blacken my fair fame by lies which are only to be produced after he is dead and cannot be called to account for them."

"These are strong assertions, Mr. Barker. Are you justified in making them? May I ask how you come to be so well acquainted with the contents of this box?"

"How? Why, on the best authority—from

the man himself. He boasted of the dastardly thing he was doing; it was on the very day he died. I challenged his right to do it, and demanded that the papers should then and there be handed over to me."

"It may be presumed, then," said Walter, "that the excitement brought on by your violence was the immediate cause of his death?"

"And if it was, young man, he had himself, and not me, to thank for it. But that is neither here nor there. The just demand I made to him I now make to you; it is that these papers, which affect no man alive but myself, should be given over to me."

"What! before I have looked at them?"

"Certainly; neither you nor any other person ought to become acquainted with these slanders. But while I do my duty by my own character, I have no wish to do you the semblance of an injury. You shall have money for them—you want money?"

"Granted."

"You shall have ten dollars."

"Thank you. But to me their value——"

"Not one cent more, and I have no time to waste in words."

As Barker had spoken, he had gradually moved to the table; he now laid his left hand on the box. His right he thrust into the breast of his topcoat, as if to produce his purse.

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Barker. The worth of these papers to me is not one to be measured by money. I am given to understand that they will enable me to clear the character of my father, Henry Blarcomb."

"Oh, indeed," sneered Barker. "So you know the story of your honored father—forgery and convict—do you, Mr. Walter Blarcomb? I congratulate you on his memory. But as he, like Romaine, is dead, nothing here can make much difference to him. Hark you! You have accepted my offer."

"No——" began Walter.

"Silence, boy! It is arranged that I pay you ten dollars for this box. Here is your money," and Barker drew out ten loose bills and laid them on the table. Instantly returning his right

hand to the breast of his coat, he produced his revolver.

“And now, young man,” he went on, “this box is mine, and I shall defend my property. Stir from that chair or make any noise, and I will shoot you like a dog. And, listen to me! You will not, like a fool, complain to the police that you have been robbed. You would gain nothing by making such a false charge. We are alone here; you would have no witnesses—it would be merely your word against mine, and mine would be believed. You understand me!”

With these words he snatched the box and turned to leave the room.

But Barker did not get far with the box. As he reached the door he found himself confronted by Ben Archer and Foxglove.

“Stop him! He has my box!” cried Walter.

Ben, tall and powerful, leaped upon Barker. In an instant he had his arms pinioned to his side in a grip like that of a vise. The revolver dropped harmlessly from his hand. His struggles were as idle as those of a mouse in the jaws of a cat.

"You take it quiet, now," observed big Ben Archer, "or I may pinch you and hurt you, and that would be a pity."

"You have him all right, Ben?"

"I have, Walter; it don't matter to me if he does kick a bit. He's tight enough."

The gas was turned up full and it was then seen that Mr. Barker was perfectly safe, but half suffocated in Ben's powerful embrace. The revolver was picked up and deposited in the wash-hand basin.

This turn in affairs had come about very simply. Ben and Foxglove had come to make a call, and, finding the front door wide open, had come up without knocking.

"Don't choke me," coughed Barker. "Let me go. You boys can have those dollar bills, I give them to you; but I wish to go."

"Your money," said Walter, "will go where you go, and that will be to the police station."

"You will observe, Mr. Barker," added Foxglove, "that as this attempted robbery, with a threat of murder, was made in the presence of two witnesses, the charge will be better supported

than you had anticipated. Take care of your prisoner, Ben, while I fetch a policeman.”

The policeman was brought, and Barker spent that night in a police cell.

Barker was next morning charged with the attempted robbery; Walter, Foxglove, Brown, and Ben Archer appearing as witnesses against him. He was committed for trial, bail being refused; and a whisper went round the court that a more serious charge would probably be brought against the prisoner before he was released.

This proved to be correct. By Mr. Pomeroy’s advice, an able lawyer was engaged to examine the papers in the tin box. Mr. Romaine’s statement was found to be formal and duly attested and to be substantiated by other documents which he had placed with it. The real forger was shown not to have been Henry Blarcomb, but Ralph Barker, and the latter person was accordingly indicted for conspiracy and perjury.

The trial, when it came on, caused no little public interest, and there was especial excitement in the court when Henry Blarcomb was placed in the witness box. The result was that Barker

was convicted and sentenced, and the character of Mr. Blarcomb was declared to be completely cleared.

But this was not the best of the good news. In the bottom of the box was found an envelope addressed to Walter, with the words added, "from your well-wisher, Archibald Romaine." The envelope contained five new five-hundred-dollar bills!

With this money the boy and his father were able to settle themselves comfortably, and Walter applied himself diligently to art. To-day there is no sculptor in America better known than Walter Loring Blarcomb. He has gained a name and fame at last.

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